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KIERKEGAARD'S ETHICS OF REPETITION: A RE-EXAMINING OF THE ETHICAL
IN THE 1843 AUTHORSHIP

A Dissertation

Submitted to Submitted to the McAnulty College and
Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Grant Julin

August 2011

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Grant Julin

2011

KIERKEGAARD'S ETHICS OF REPETITION: A REEXAMINING OF THE
ETHICAL IN THE 1843 AUTHORSHIP

By

Grant Julin

Approved May 25, 2011

Ronald Polansky, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Chair)

Charles Don Keyes, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Member)

James Swindal, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Philosophy
(Committee Member)

Dean Christopher M. Duncan, Ph.D.
Dean, McAnulty Graduate School of
Liberal Arts

James Swindal, Ph.D.
Chair, Department of Philosophy
Associate Professor of Philosophy

ABSTRACT

KIERKEGAARD'S ETHICS OF REPETITION: A REEXAMINING OF THE ETHICAL IN THE 1843 AUTHORSHIP

By

Grant Julin

August 2011

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Ronald Polansky, Ph.D.

Conventional interpretations of Kierkegaard's ethical theory during his 1843 authorship fall into two general categories: In the first, Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical is reducible to some duty bound, Kantian reading of Judge William in *Either/Or II*; in the second, Kierkegaard is depicted as an advocate of some form of Divine Command theory through the Abraham story in *Fear and Trembling*. Both interpretations not only lack textual and scholarly support, but also result in a faulty rendering of Kierkegaard's philosophical teachings, namely the idea that the ethical is a derivative "stage" to be surpassed for the religious. Such a reading not only grossly misinterprets Kierkegaard's stages—for no "stage" is surpassed, but only enhanced and enriched in its successor—but also overlooks the importance of the ethical in

Kierkegaard's philosophy. The essence and foundation of Kierkegaard's teachings is the subject, i.e., the existing individual, and it is only when one transitions into the ethical that the subject is said to truly exist. From this perspective, the ethical is the foundation and core of Kierkegaard's philosophy. Unfortunately, the 1843 work that speaks to the question of becoming ethical—*Repetition*—has gone largely overlooked by scholars of Kierkegaard. While *Repetition* has gained popularity in recent years as the “darling of deconstruction,” few scholars acknowledge the ethical importance of this work. In this dissertation, I argue that *Repetition* puts forth a very unique contribution to existential ethical theory and in particular to the problem of ethical subjectivity. Kierkegaard's ethics of repetition is based upon what I call “the repetition movement,” a transcendence of self that incorporates elements of Aristotelian metaphysics, as well as Kierkegaard's own unique understanding of existential inwardness and movement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank the following for their tireless effort and assistance in helping me complete this dissertation: Ronald Polansky, James Swindal, Charles Don Keyes, Arthur Remillard, Patricia McVicker, Rosemary Bertocci, Francis Bertocci, Steven G. Neeley, and the St. Francis Writing Circle.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	vi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	x
Introduction: The Stagecoach	xi
Chapter One: Towards a Kierkegaardian Ethic	1
1.1 The Problem: Nihilism and Kierkegaardian Violence	1
1.2 A Re-Reading of Kierkegaard’s “Stages”	6
1.3 How to Read Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship	16
1.4 “The Ethical” in Kierkegaard	20
1.5 <i>Either/Or</i>	23
a. “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage”	26
b. The Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical In the Development of Personality	34
1.6 <i>Fear and Trembling</i> (Is Not About Ethics)	42
a. The Ethical in Fear and Trembling	43
1.7 Conclusions: Gaining Oneself	53
Chapter 2: Kierkegaard’s Ethics of Repetition	56
2.1 Repetitions	56
2.2 First Monologue: The Case for Repetition	58
2.3 Experiment One – The Story of the Young Man	64
2.4 The Second Monologue: Repetition and Kinesis	68
2.5 Experiment Two – Constantin’s Trip To Berlin	72
2.6 Letters from the Young Man	81
a. The First Letter	82

b. The Second Letter: First Paean to Job	84
c. The Third Letter: Consciousness Raised to the Second Power.....	87
d. The Fourth Letter: Confidence and Boldness	89
e. The Fifth Letter: Job’s Unwavering Certitude	90
f. The Sixth Letter: Tenacity in the Face of Uncertainty.....	92
g. The Seventh Letter: “I Clip Myself”	93
h. The Young Man’s Final Letter: The Climax?.....	94
2.7 The Mad Professor Reveals Himself.....	97
2.8 What is Repetition?	98
2.9 Repetition in <i>Either/Or II</i> vs. Repetition in <i>Repetition</i>	103
2.10 Receiving Oneself Back: The Wisdom of Job’s Repetition	106
2.11 Is Job’s Repetition Active or Passive?	109
Chapter 3: Becoming Ethical	113
3.1 Filling in the Gaps	113
3.2 The Rupture	115
a. Abraham, Job, and Paul	116
b. The Young Man and Constantin	120
3.3 Love, Temporality, and Free Will.....	125
b. The Second Stage: Freedom’s Task in Sagacity	134
c. The Third Stage: Repetition as Concerned Freedom.....	136
3.4 The Way: Ethics and Irony	141
3.5 Earnestness: Ethical Seriousness and Concern	150
3.6 Ethical Repetitions	156
3.7 Deeper Repetitions: The God-Man Relationship.....	162
3.8 Is Kierkegaard a Religious Thinker?.....	167

3.9 Kierkegaard vs. Nietzsche	171
Conclusion	181
References	185

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used for references to works by Kierkegaard.

CI The Concept of Irony

E/O I *Either/Or I*

E/O II *Either/Or II*

FT Fear and Trembling

CA *Concept of Anxiety*

R *Repetition*

CUP *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*

WL *Works of Love*

EUD *Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses*

JN *Journals and Notes*

Introduction

The Stagecoach

“Get me a possibility, get me possibility, the only thing that can save me is possibility! A possibility and the despairer breathes again, he revives; for without possibility it is as though a person cannot draw breath.”
—Anti-Climacus, *Sickness Unto Death*¹

If Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* (1843) were a stagecoach, it would be a bulky, rickety carriage that jolts passengers side to side down treacherous and uncertain trails. Like the ungainly stagecoach, *Repetition* moves along clumsily, jumping between deep philosophical musings on Diogenes, Plato, Hegel, and Leibniz, to the wiles of two separate and seemingly unrelated protagonists. Against the cumbersome backdrop is a literary structure and narrative equally unwieldy—a smattering of styles (technical philosophical writing, poetry, written correspondence, esthetic criticism) and tones (part tragedy, part comedy, part novella) mixed with enough plot twists to make the reader feel that *Repetition* is a runaway rickety stagecoach with its horses, scared into a nervous start, barreling out of control through a deep and dark forest.

Perhaps the only constant in *Repetition* is its unsteadiness, a work perpetually on the verge of collapse. Our “author,” Constantin Constantius,² is a troubled esthete who creates and then tests a new philosophy of movement, despairing at his failure to do so. Within this narrative is the story of the Young Man—Constantin’s recently engaged

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983), pg. 39.

² Kierkegaard wrote *Repetition* under this pseudonym and the repetitive nature of the name is one of many literary repetitions in the work.

esthetic confidant—who seeks our author’s guidance and comfort as he struggles to reconcile his desire for erotic love on the one hand and marital love on the other. The Young Man disappears without notice midway through the first part of the work, only to resurface several pages into the second part through his written letters to our author. The work ends as quickly as it begins, and readers expecting any sort of resolution in *Repetition* will be disappointed.

The unsteadiness of the narrative is manifest in the main figures of the work who, like the stagecoach, come off as aimless and overburdened. Neither the Young Man nor Constantin resolve their existential problems by the close of *Repetition*, and the mental state of both is questionable.³ Adding to the bewildering nature of this work is the fact that, in the final pages Constantin informs us that the Young Man does not exist, but is merely his own creation. Given the unsteadiness of the story, its style, and key characters, the first time reader of *Repetition* will find little to hold onto as she navigates through this perplexing text. If the reader, even for a moment, gains a foothold, Kierkegaard’s stagecoach is thrown off path and down a new and uncertain trail.

Yet, the unsteadiness of *Repetition* is not without purpose, for the subject of repetition, human existence, is also unsteady. Where the history of Western philosophy has sought to understand the human person in the form of some singular immutable entity, Kierkegaard suggests otherwise, approaching the individual as a being that *becomes*. Like the erratic movements of the bulky stagecoach, qualitative movements of soul can also be jarring, discordant, and sometimes unpredictable. Existential growth and enrichment do not emerge in a linear and systematic fashion, for qualitative growth does

³ Several times throughout the text Constantin alludes to his own mental instability (see *Repetition* 180, 189, 193), and the Young Man, in a draft close to publication, commits suicide (see JN, 207).

not move forward (or backward) *but inward*. These qualitative movements and changes can be slow and ongoing, or they can take the form of quick and sporadic bursts, but, for Kierkegaard, it is these types of movements that define and shape the human person. Consequently, the style, tone, and narrative of *Repetition*, however confusing, is entirely consistent with his account of the object of analysis in the work, subjective becoming.

But perhaps what is most interesting about *Repetition* is that the real author of the work was, at the time of its composition, in the midst of his own transitional period. Like the key figures in *Repetition*, Kierkegaard, in the throes of his own existential crisis, remained incredibly uncertain about his future: would he marry or become an author? Although the Young Man and Constantin are essential figures in the text, *Repetition* is best understood by first examining the real life events and ideas influencing the real author of *Repetition*—Kierkegaard.

In September of 1840, a 26-year-old Kierkegaard proposed to a then 18-year-old Ms. Regine Olsen, having met her three years prior. Just over a year later, having successfully defended his MA thesis,⁴ he terminated the engagement on October 11, 1841⁵ in a well-publicized break that would, in turn, become the defining moment of his life. Whether Kierkegaard broke with Regine because of her immaturity, his melancholy, or his inability to become a good husband in the face of his aspirations to become an author, we do not know.⁶ What we do know is that, like Constantin and the Young Man, Kierkegaard was incredibly troubled at this stage in his life. Just a day before the conferring and royal authorization of Kierkegaard's degree (October 26, 1841), he

⁴ Kierkegaard's Masters Thesis *On the Concept of Irony*, defended to a public audience on September 29, 1841 for nearly 8 hours (CI, xi), would later be upgraded to a Doctorate.

⁵ Kierkegaard returned the ring on August 11, 1841. (CI, xix)

⁶ A very revealing Journal entry from May 17 1843 suggests all of the above. (See JN, 164-166)

departed from his hometown of Copenhagen for Berlin.⁷ This excursion was of no minor importance for Kierkegaard as this trip sets the stage for his most prolific era of authorship, as well as the work under present consideration, *Repetition*.

Kierkegaard's stay in Berlin lasted just over four months, from October 25, 1841 until March 6, 1842. Unfortunately, with the exception of a mention of a few cultural sights and complaints of Berlin's weather, a deceptive hotelier and his ineptitude with the German language (Garff, 208), little is written in his journals and letter correspondence regarding actual events during this time period. We do know he stayed indoors most of the time, with "[f]ree time only on Sundays, no excursions, not much entertainment."⁸ However, this time spent indoors was by no means unproductive for Kierkegaard, completing the majority of his *Either/Or* while keeping a very rigorous academic schedule. Writing to his closest confidant Emile Boesen on this incredibly productive winter, Kierkegaard states:

This winter in Berlin will always be of great significance to me. I have accomplished a great deal. When you consider that I have attended three or four hours of lectures every day, that I have had an hour's language lesson daily, and that I have nonetheless got so much written ... have done some reading, I cannot complain.⁹

The lectures Kierkegaard mentioned were those of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854), arguably the greatest philosopher of the romantic period, recently appointed to the University of Berlin. Lecturing on his *Philosophy of Revelation* to a filled

⁷ Kierkegaard had a tendency to embark on a journey after major events in his life, traveling to Gilleleir after his mother's death in 1834, and a pilgrimage to Saeding after his father's death in 1838. As Hong remarks in his introduction to *Concept of Irony*: "The first two journeys were 'inland journeys' times of reflection. The Berlin journey and sojourn were more a time of instructions and production." (Hong, xix)

⁸ *Letters*, no. 69: February 27, 1842

⁹ *Letters*, no. 68: February 6, 1842

auditorium,¹⁰ Schelling's lectures were so popular that many were turned away, relegating many to stand outside and listen through open windows. Writing on these lectures to Professor Frederick Christian Sibbern, Kierkegaard remarks:

Schelling lectures to a select, numerous, and yet also an undique conflatum auditorium [audience blown together from everywhere]. During the first lectures it was almost a matter of risking one's life to hear him. I have never in my life experienced such uncomfortable crowding—still, what would one not do to be able to hear Schelling? His main point is always that there are two philosophies, one positive and one negative. The negative is given, but not by Hegel, for Hegel's is neither negative nor positive but a refined Spinozism. The positive is yet to come.¹¹

Although there are only two mentions of Schelling in his journals, Kierkegaard learned of his philosophy through H.L. Martensen's university lectures during winter semester 1838-1839.¹² Kierkegaard's eagerness to attend Schelling's lectures was incited by his highly anticipated "positive philosophy," which attempted to combat the philosophy of Hegel (then ten years deceased) which had up to that point dominated German culture and thought. Unlike his earlier "negative" philosophy (a philosophy of the "what"), Schelling's "positive" Philosophy of Revelation (a philosophy of the "that") promised a comprehensive account of everything from nature, history, art, and mythology, to religion, freedom, and "existents" (CI, xx).

¹⁰ Notables in attendance included Swiss historian Jakob Burkardt, fathers of Communism Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, and Russian political philosopher and anarchist Michael Bakunin.

¹¹ *Letters*, no. 54: December 14, 1841.

¹² In addition, two of Schelling's works appeared in Kierkegaard's library catalog when it went up for auction. (COI xix)

The conditions of these lectures were so overcrowded and noisy, that Kierkegaard was initially tempted to leave.¹³ However, Kierkegaard decided to stay, and was very happy that he did:

I am so happy to have heard Schelling's second lecture—indescribably so. I have long groaned, and the thoughts within me have groaned, in travail. Then he spoke the word 'actuality,' about the relation of philosophy to actuality, and the unborn babe of thought within me leapt for joy as in Elizabeth. I remember almost every word he said from that moment on. Here, perhaps, clarity can emerge. That one word reminded me of all my philosophical sufferings and torments...Now I have put all my hope in Schelling (JP, Vol. 5, 5535)

Kierkegaard's enthusiasm for Schelling's positive philosophy was based in a shared distaste for Hegel's speculative philosophy and in particular Hegel's oversimplification of human becoming. Kierkegaard, of course, was highly critical of the Hegelian dialectic, which he believed devalued human existence into some absolute and necessary process, and Schelling's lectures focused on the inability of Hegel's speculative reason to account for "immediate actuality."¹⁴ Like Schelling, Kierkegaard sought a philosophy that could account for concrete human existence as a being that becomes in actuality. In his early journal entries, Kierkegaard expressed interest in Aristotle's understanding of movement (*kinesis*) as a transition from potentiality to actuality, and Schelling's positive philosophy, based upon these same Aristotelian ideas, was the first to approach the human person in this manner.

Yet, Kierkegaard's interest in Schelling was also a personal matter. During this period, Kierkegaard was struggling to understand the direction and trajectory of his own life. Having broken his engagement with his only true love to pursue a career as an

¹³ See *Letters*, no 51: pgs. 97-98.

¹⁴ See *Schelling's Berlin Lectures*, pg. 336.

author, Kierkegaard was hopelessly uncertain about his future and the state of his own existence. Had he made the right decision? Would he find success and fulfillment as a writer, and what role would his faith play in this decision? In the face of great uncertainty, Kierkegaard believed Schelling's philosophy might guide him through this turmoil, and even lead him back to his beloved Regine.

Here [in actuality], clarity can be achieved. This one word [actuality] recalled all my philosophical pains and sufferings and so that she, too, might share my joy, how willingly I would return to her, how eagerly I would coax myself to believe that this is the right course.—Oh, if only I could!—now I have put all my hope in Schelling.¹⁵

Unfortunately, Kierkegaard's optimism and hope for Schelling's philosophy did not last. As the semester wore on, letters from the beginning of 1843 compared Schelling to a "sour vinegar brewer" whose philosophical nonsense and cantankerous demeanor diminished the value of these lectures for Kierkegaard.

To make matters worse, he has now got the idea of lecturing longer than usual, which has given me the idea that I do not want to listen to him for as long as I might otherwise have listened ... I am too old to listen to lectures, just as Schelling is too old to give them. His entire doctrine of potencies reveals the highest degree of impotence.¹⁶

What was once a tremendous source of hope had turned out to be fool's gold, and on February 3, 1842 he decided never to return to that Berlin lecture hall again.¹⁷ Although Berlin had been a remarkably influential and productive period for Kierkegaard,¹⁸ his sojourn had not resolved his existential turmoil. In letters to Boesen in those last weeks, he rattled off a litany of physical and psychological maladies: "cold, partial sleeplessness,

¹⁵ Notes on the Berlin Lectures, xxiii; JN V 5535.

¹⁶ *Letters*, no. 74: February 5, 1843.

¹⁷ Kierkegaard attended 41 of Schelling's lectures from November 15, 1841 to February 4, 1842. See "Schelling's Berlin Lectures" (Hong, 1989).

¹⁸ In the remaining month he spent there, Kierkegaard composed the majority of his great work, *Either/Or*.

nervous affections, disappointed expectations with respect to Schelling, confusion of my philosophical ideas, no diversions, no opposition to stimulate me.”¹⁹ In addition, his uncle, Troels-Lund, believed his nephew to be “raving mad.”

It was quite a peculiar activity for the runaway villain, who had broken up with his sweetheart in Copenhagen, to sit in a hotel in Berlin, despite winter cold, arthritis, and insomnia, so that he could labor strenuously and relentlessly on a work—in praise of marriage.²⁰

If Berlin had been a troublesome period for Kierkegaard, it was unquestionably formative in some way, for when he returned to Copenhagen on March 6, 1842, he would begin the most prolific period of his authorship.²¹

Upon returning to Copenhagen, Kierkegaard remained focused on completing *Either/Or*,²² which appeared on Reitzel’s Bookshop on February 20, 1843. It was the first publication of many about his beloved Regine. Although Johannes the Seducer is not Kierkegaard, it is clear that the figure of the seducer in *Either/Or I* was unquestionably inspired through his relationship with Regine. In addition, it is unlikely that Kierkegaard’s thorough analysis of the merits and virtues of marriage would have arisen had he not terminated the engagement. Although Kierkegaard broke with Regine, he was still very much in love with her.

In addition to working on *Either/Or*, Søren was also preoccupied with seeing his love again. Although they would exchange a “wordless encounter” every Monday

¹⁹ *Letters*, no. 74: February 5, 1843.

²⁰ Garff cites Toels-Lund, pg. 210.

²¹ In the coming 16 months Kierkegaard would write no less than three major works *Either/Or*, *a Fragment of Life* (appearing Feb 20, 1843 by Victor Eremita), *Fear and Trembling* (appearing October 16 1843 by Johannes de silentio), *Repetition* (appearing October 16 by Constantine Constantius), as well as *Seven Upbuilding Discourses*—1843 by far his most prolific year.

²² Kierkegaard completed much of the major sections of *Either/Or* in Berlin. By April 14, 1842, he had completed “The First Love,” “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama,” and at least half of “The Seducer’s Diary.”

morning between the hours of nine and ten (JN, 161), it was an Easter Sunday exchange that drastically changed Kierkegaard's life.

On Easter Sunday at evensong in the Church of Our Lady (during Mynster's sermon) she nodded to me. I do not know whether it was pleadingly or forgivingly but in any case affectionately. I had taken a seat at a remote spot but she spotted me. Would to God she hadn't. Now a year and a half of suffering are wasted and all the enormous pains I took; she does not believe I was a deceiver, she trusts me. What ordeals now lie ahead of her. The next will be that I am a hypocrite. The higher we go the more dreadful it is. That a person of my inwardness, of my religiousness, could behave in such a way! (JN, 161)

The remainder of this journal entry would be destroyed by Kierkegaard, leaving the reader to speculate on the significance of this passage. But a later 1849 journal entry reveals his interpretation of the exchange. "She nodded twice. I shook my head. That meant, 'You must give me up.' Then she nodded again, and I nodded in as friendly a manner as possible. That meant, 'you still have my love'."²³ From Kierkegaard's perspective, the indirect discourse between him and Regine during that Sunday morning service indicated a forgiveness of sorts and an acknowledgment of his undying and unconditional love. However, Kierkegaard completely misinterpreted this exchange. Unbeknownst to him, Regine had just become engaged to Fritz Schlegel, and Kierkegaard's nod indicated consent. Although he did not know it yet, he had lost her forever.

On May 8, 1843, Kierkegaard made a second trip to Berlin. Like the first trip, he took a steamship from Copenhagen to Strausland where he stayed the night. In his journals, Kierkegaard stated that this entire trip was marked by feeling of *déjà vu*, remarking, "[i]t seems as if everything existed merely to bring back memories" (JN, 162).

²³ Garff cites Kierkegaard, 229.

Just above his room, a young girl playing the piano nearly drove him mad. Among these songs she played Weber's "Last Waltz"—the very first piece he had heard on his last sojourn to Berlin. When he awoke the next day, he took a stagecoach, and then a train (just like his previous trip) to Berlin, and booked a room at Hotel Saxon (the same hotel from his previous visit). Everything was repeating, but the repetitive nature of these events was incredibly unsettling for Kierkegaard. Although his first trip to Berlin ended in a great disappointment, it was nonetheless incredibly formative and inspirational, inciting a period of tremendous creative flourishing. But on this second trip, Kierkegaard was not feeling inspired. Instead, he expressed feelings of psychological and intellectual paralysis and the day after he arrived, he was "on the brink of collapse" (JN, 162).

Despite this strange and weakened state of mind, something happened on the second day. "Now I am deeply exhausted by the journey, somewhat weak; but that will get better. Yesterday I arrived, today I am at work, and my brain is pulsating ... At this moment the busy thoughts are at work again, and the pen flourishes in my hand."²⁴

Although Kierkegaard did not post this letter, a new letter was penned and sent on May 15th:

Now I am afloat again. In a certain sense I have already achieved what I might wish for. I did not know whether I needed one hour for it, or one minute, or half a year—an idea—a hint—sat sapientia [sufficient for the wise], now I am climbing. As far as that goes, I could return home at once, but I will not do so, although I shall probably not travel any farther than Berlin.²⁵

On just his second day in Berlin, Kierkegaard had accomplished enough to have returned to Copenhagen satisfied. Breaking from the trappings of the repetitions of his first trip, Kierkegaard suddenly became inspired, but this time it was through his own ideas.

²⁴ *Letters*, no. 79: May 1843.

²⁵ *Letters*, no. 80: May 1843.

In my indolence, I have pumped up a mighty shower during the past several months. Now I have pulled the chain, and the ideas are pouring over me—healthy, happy, thriving, cheerful, blessed children, easily born, yet all bearing the birthmark of my personality.²⁶

As the ideas flowed, so did the ink from Kierkegaard's pen. Over the next two weeks, Kierkegaard worked tirelessly on his new philosophy.

I have never worked as hard as now. I go out for a brief walk in the morning. Then I go home, sit uninterrupted at my desk until close to three o'clock. My eyes can hardly see. Then I take my walking stick and steal over to the restaurant, but I am so weak that if anyone shouted my name out loud I would keel over and die. Then I go home and begin again.²⁷

At the end of those two weeks, Kierkegaard had completed the work that would encapsulate his new philosophy of life, a work of great "importance" to him.²⁸ Though physically weakened, Kierkegaard's spirit soared. He was still in a crisis, but a necessary one, writing to Boesen: "If I do not die on the way, I believe you will find me happier than ever before. It is a new crisis, and it means either that I now commence living or that I must die. There would be one more way out of it: that I would lose my mind."²⁹ The work that Kierkegaard had completed during those 15 days was *Repetition*, a work that would develop into a new philosophy of life, one that demands us to live *forward*, and not backward (JN, 179). When Kierkegaard returned to Copenhagen fifteen days later on May 30, he had undergone a transformation of soul, losing and then regaining himself and creating a new philosophy of life in the process.

Why Repetition?

²⁶ *Letters*, no. 82: May 25 1843.

²⁷ *Letters*, no. 83: May 1843.

²⁸ *Letters*, no. 82: May 1843.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

For many, *Repetition* is a rather insignificant work in Kierkegaard's corpus, and understandably so. First, *Repetition* was published the same year as his most well-known works, *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*, the latter of which was published on the very same day as *Repetition*. Second, as noted, *Repetition* comes off as an impenetrable and confusing work. Its cumbersome philosophical discourse and frustrating narrative is difficult to navigate for even the most astute readers. Third, in a later journal entry Kierkegaard himself would dismiss the work, remarking: "*Repetition* was insignificant, without any philosophical pretension, a droll little book, dashed off as an oddity ..."³⁰

In response to these criticisms, I want to suggest that *Repetition* is essential to understanding the overall project of his 1843 authorship. If *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling* represent various ways of living, *Repetition*, we will soon see, discusses how one becomes and flourishes as an existing subject in and through various modes of existence. Furthermore, this work is by far his most autobiographical. *Repetition* is about qualitative changes of soul, and *Repetition* documents Kierkegaard's most troubling and transformative years, namely his engagement and subsequent break with Regine, as well as his decision and struggle to pursue a writing career in lieu of married life. It is no coincidence that the Young Man struggles with his decision between marriage and becoming a poet, breaking with his betrothed in exactly the same manner as Kierkegaard broke with Regine (R, 12: Piety). In addition, it is also no coincidence that Constantin is lacking meaning in his life, that he "cannot find the Archimedean point" (R, 186). In general, the Young Man and Constantin, are, like Kierkegaard, transitional figures on the cusp of real qualitative change. We learn the Young Man does not exist

³⁰ *Journals and Papers*, IV B, 120.

but is merely a creation of Constantin's, and Kierkegaard, of course, is the creator of both. Although the reader of *Repetition* is confronted with three characters, the close reader of *Repetition* comes to realize that this repetition is a reduplication of a single soul amidst real qualitative change through and in temporality. However, as we will soon see, the "the real reader" of *Repetition* (R, 225) will not only bear witness to the changes undergone in our author's soul, for Kierkegaard's experimenting psychology is not some detached objective observation of an individual amidst real qualitative change. Instead, Kierkegaard's experimenting psychology works more as a probe into the reader's soul, prodding and stinging him so that he might undergo "a repetition of his own personality in the eternity of his imagination" (Mackey, 23).

Yet, the real significance of *Repetition* lies in its philosophical content. However unwieldy and impenetrable, *Repetition* offers substantial contributions to the ethical, and in particular in relation to the crisis of modern morality. From antiquity to modernity, philosophers had traditionally sought ethical normativity in the form of some universalized or absolute idea or principle. This idea of course has its origins in the great Plato, who was the first philosopher to posit some absolute idea upon which all truth is based, namely the Good.³¹ Since then philosophers have in one way or another sought out ethical value in this manner, i.e., as a universalized idea by which all human action can be explained and assessed. For the Medieval philosophers such as Aquinas, and Augustine, this idea of absolute goodness is understood through dogmatic Christian doctrine and the eternal and perfect nature of God's being. Although God plays less of a role in modern conceptions of the ethical, moderns continue to view morality as having

³¹ Plato's ethics, of course, can be viewed independently of this notion of the "Good." Nonetheless, human value for Plato must be understood with regard to an absolute framework.

its basis in some universal ideal—whether it be Hegel’s *Geist*, Kant’s categorical imperative, or Mill’s greatest happiness principle. For most modern philosophers, human reason and the promises of rationality spawned by the Enlightenment become the new absolute with which ethical normativity is to be sought.

Though the origins of what became known as the crisis of modern morality long precede his ideas, Nietzsche’s claim in *The Gay Science* that “God is dead”³² is the first to bring it to light. Though many erroneously interpret Nietzsche’s observation as a theological statement, the parable is more a testament to the death of “absolute truth” rather than some spiritual Diety. When the Madman, in hopeless frustration, smashes his lantern on the ground he expresses the frustration and despair of the modern age, namely the idea that we no longer believe in absolute truths yet continue living our lives as though we did. Of course modernity’s idol is not God, but science, yet science for the Madman (and Nietzsche) is a paltry substitute. For Nietzsche, the crisis of modernity is humanity’s inability to realize that it is living according a value system that it no longer adheres to. The result he argues is a corrosive and destructive nihilism that for Nietzsche has worked against human flourishing in a caustic and cannibalistic devaluing of the human values. In his seminal work *After Virtue* (1981) some 100 years later, Alasdair MacIntyre re-opens the Madman’s wound, re-stating the crisis within the context of a value system based upon the post-enlightenment paradigm Nietzsche predicted—one that has become entirely positivistic. Like Nietzsche, MacIntyre argues that the crisis of morality has resulted in a nihilistic framework resulting largely from improper conceptions of what we mean by the ethical, which for him originated in the

³² Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), sec. 25.

enlightenment turn away from the telos-based systems of Aristotle for the promises of the Enlightenment. The crisis of modernity for MacIntyre is the result of the Enlightenment's failure to provide "a rational justification of morality" to people characterized by their autonomy and "transcendental freedom" (AV, 39). The result, MacIntyre argues, is a moral worldview entirely devoid of value—a worldview that for him culminates in the philosophy of Kierkegaard, and in particular Judge William's claim in *Either/Or II* that the only hope of entering morality is through a "radical and ultimate choice" (AV, 41).³³ While I agree with MacIntyre's claim that modern morality is indeed amidst a crisis instigated by an improper conception of the ethical, I disagree with him that the solution to problem lies merely returning to an older, "truer" account of normativity—which in his case is the virtue-based model put forth by Aristotle and further refined by Aquinas. The crisis of modernity cannot be fixed by merely re-storing a normative standard that has long been dismissed—for this, as Nietzsche points out, is the problem. Like many philosophers before him, MacIntyre all too easily overlooks the true real problem of morality's nihilism and the problem presented by the Madman. Consequently, one may wonder whether MacIntyre, like the unaware crowd who laughs at the Madman, has failed to realize the profound philosophical implications of God's death, seeking to bring "God" back to life through re-treating to the comforts of some already established philosophical doctrine. This for Nietzsche does not solve the problem, but only perpetuates it. Neither the Madman, nor Nietzsche, are joyous over God's demise. The fatal revelation of the Madman's message is that, with God's death, there is no return to "God," no return to an absolute standard. Nietzsche presents to the

³³ In the first chapter of this dissertation I provide a thorough analysis of MacIntyre's critique of Judge William's claim that ethics can only be entered through self-choice.

world the horror of living in a world without absolute truth, where the individual is forever estranged from the world (and perhaps himself) in a life that is hopelessly uncertain.

Even though Kierkegaard did not (and could not read) Nietzsche, he too presages God's death in the Nietzschean sense, and *Repetition* in particular speaks to this problem directly. Like Nietzsche (and Socrates before him) I read Kierkegaard as a polemical philosopher whose writings force us to engage with particular philosophical problems. Like Nietzsche and MacIntyre, Kierkegaard was incredibly bothered by the specter of nihilism and the vapid and empty values of those around him.³⁴ Like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard was calling for a new approach to truth that could handle the complexities of, not only the ever-changing world, but the ever-changing self, and some have remarked that existentialism begins with the publication of *Repetition* in 1843 and its call for a "new category of truth" (Carlisle, 137). Contra MacIntyre, I do not read Kierkegaard or Nietzsche as philosophers who have hijacked morality and run it aground. These philosophers are not the source of the problem. To the contrary, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are philosophers who force us to address modernity's moral crisis—i.e., the clash between our desire for truth on one hand, and its ever-elusive nature on the other. For these philosophers truth arises in (and not out of) paradox, and both present the crisis of morality in a manner that provides us with the opportunity to philosophically reassess the ethical and what we mean by ethics. One cannot help notice that MacIntyre, in reverting to the comforts of Aristotelian teleology, avoids the real problem at the heart

³⁴ Where Nietzsche defined nihilism as "*That the highest values devalue themselves*" (*Will To Power*, ¶2), Kierkegaard's *Present Age* (1846) depicts a nihilistic era that had run aground in its laziness, apathy, and mediocrity.

of the crisis through retreating into an essentialist framework that, for both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, is the real source of the problem. I read Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as providing us with a starting point for the crisis of morality. Yet, and perhaps most importantly, these philosophers are not merely polemical. Though both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard spend much of their time addressing the failures of modern morality, both provide us with a philosophical frame of reference to get it back on path.³⁵ Whether or not Kierkegaard, as MacIntyre argues, reduces morality to a nihilistic and solipsistic subjectivity, and whether Kierkegaard's ethical theory can actually provide value, will be worked out in the coming chapters. What I want to suggest is that, once we read Kierkegaard's 1843 authorship as addressing the polemic of the modern moral crisis, an ethical theory emerges in his writings that, though by no means provides a solution to the quandary, provides a framework to navigate its treacherous and uncertain terrain. This philosophy is best worked out in his *Repetition*, which develops a philosophy centered on the idea of the human person who must perpetually work towards defining and understanding himself as a being that creates ethical value. What emerges is an approach to the problem of morality that places value in the continuing cultivation of human character.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I address the inadequacies of conventional interpretations of Kierkegaard's ethics through an analysis of *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*. In the second chapter I provide an exposition of *Repetition* that I argue contains Kierkegaard's most comprehensive account of a philosophical ethics in his 1843 authorship. In the final chapter I analyze the intricacies of becoming ethical in

³⁵ I will provide a closer comparison of the philosophies of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and their respective approaches to the modern moral crisis in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Kierkegaard's philosophy, focusing in particular on how the individual makes the qualitative leap from the esthetic to the ethico-esthetic. In addition, I address problems his ethics of repetition leaves unanswered through an examination of his personal journals, as well as other non-pseudonymous works.

Chapter One

Towards a Kierkegaardian Ethic

1.1 The Problem: Nihilism and Kierkegaardian Violence

Conventional interpretations of Kierkegaard's ethical theory during his 1843 authorship fall into two general categories: In the first, Kierkegaard's understanding of the ethical is reducible to some duty bound, Kantian reading of Judge William in *Either/Or II*; in the second, Kierkegaard is depicted as an advocate of some form of Divine Command theory through the Abraham story in *Fear and Trembling*. These interpretations have resulted in some rather hasty conclusions regarding the role and nature of "the ethical" in his philosophy, in particular the idea that ethics is either of subsidiary importance to, or wholly superseded by, the "religious." This reading of Kierkegaard appears in many philosophy textbooks, online primers, and encyclopedias, where discussion of the ethical ends, usually quite abruptly, with mention of the "religious stage." For most, the ethical in Kierkegaard is nothing more than a stage of existence on the way to religious fulfillment—the ethical having no value in and of itself. This interpretation is typically supported with reference to *Fear and Trembling*, where Kierkegaard, through the pseudonym Johannes de silentio, is interpreted as praising Abraham for his readiness to sacrifice Isaac, i.e., to "suspend" temporarily his familial ethical obligations in obedience to God's decree.

The idea that the ethical holds a subordinate value in his philosophy has resulted in two very serious criticisms of Kierkegaard: (1) that his ethical theory is ultimately destructive to the human condition; and (2) that his ethics of radical subjectivity amounts to some form of nihilism. Although these attacks have come from various fronts,³⁶ Levinas in his *Existence and Ethics* (1963) seems to formulate these criticisms best.

Levinas was very much influenced by Kierkegaard's approach to the subject, believing him to have "rehabilitated the topic of subjectivity, uniqueness and individuality" from the idealism and rationalism of his day, which had marginalized human existence into totalized, thematized, and generalized categories of thought. Levinas believes that Kierkegaard was the first philosopher to realize fully the limitations of reducing subjectivity to the Cartesian Cogito: "Being, according to Kierkegaard, was not the correlative of thought," and the self is not something to be "transcended" and "handed over to reason" (Levinas, 26-27). However, Levinas admittedly struggles in coming to understand Kierkegaard's unique notion of the subject, suggesting that he may have pushed subjectivity to such an extreme as to render the individual incomprehensible beyond anything more than an egoistic framework (Levinas, 28).

Summarizing his understanding of Kierkegaard's well-known stages, Levinas argues that the existential progression from the esthetic to the ethical to the religious is not only inadequate for, but hazardous to, the human soul. Beginning with the esthetic stage, which he describes as an "appeal to the particularity of sensation and pleasure," Levinas rightly captures Kierkegaard's criticism of the esthetic life, namely its inability to ground the self in anything beyond the fleeting pleasures of hedonistic pursuit. The

³⁶ Perhaps most notably from Buber (1957), Blanshard (1974), and MacIntyre (1981).

esthetic stage, “where subjectivity is dissipated and destroyed,” leads to “the depths of despair” (Levinas, 27). The “alternative” to the esthetic life for the subject is the ethical stage, “in which the inner life finds expression and fulfillment in the world of law and society, putting its trust in principles and institutions and human communication” (Levinas, 27). Unlike its predecessor, the ethical stage is capable of providing a stable foundation for individual human conduct. However, the ethical realm, grounded in “totalized” and “generalized” principles, “would itself turn out to be incapable of containing the thinker” for true “human inwardness” is an inexpressible secret “associated above all with the burning pain of sin” (Levinas, 29). The primary concern of the individual, according to Levinas’ account of Kierkegaard, is the guilt, shame, suffering, and anxiety associated with being born into original sin. Yet, the ethical stage, based in rational principles, cannot express this truth, for true human subjectivity is pre-linguistic and cannot be communicated through the objective framework of language foundational to the ethical stage. As a result, Levinas portrays Kierkegaard’s understanding of self as an “incommunicable burning” that manifests in one’s existing in perpetual “tension over itself.”

Because the individual cannot explicate himself externally concerning the deep conflict of existence, he will require a new kind of truth, a truth “which would reflect the incommensurability of subjectivity,” namely belief (Levinas, 29). Levinas describes Kierkegaard’s conception of belief as always existing “in relationship with a suffering truth,” i.e., the suffering associated with original sin. But this new form of truth, requiring the “leap of faith” into the religious stage, does not in any way synthesize or resolve the primary tension or suffering of the individual, for suffering is part of the

subject's "essence as truth" (Levinas, 29). The subject who has entered the realm of belief now suffers "in a relationship with God" (Levinas, 29). This new relationship to truth is highly problematic for Levinas, for "the suffering truth does not open us out to others, but to God in isolation" (Levinas, 30). Levinas argues that Kierkegaard, in isolating the individual from the rest of the world, has pushed subjectivity too far, accusing him of contributing to "the violence of the modern world, with its cult of Passion and Fury" (Levinas, 30). Aligning him with Nietzsche, Levinas accuses Kierkegaard of condoning a nihilistic moral theory that inflicts a great violence upon the soul:

Kierkegaardian violence begins when existence is forced to abandon the ethical stage in order to embark on the religious stage, the domain of belief. But belief no longer sought external justification. Even internally, it combined communication and isolation, and hence violence and passion. That is the origin of the relegation of ethical phenomena to secondary status and the contempt of the ethical foundation of being which has led, through Nietzsche, to the amorality of recent philosophies (Levinas, 31).

Levinas' reading suggests that the "authentic" subjectivity that Kierkegaard's existential dialectic pursues results in a "renunciation" and "repression" of subjectivity" (Levinas, 31). When one abandons the ethical for the realm of the religious, the transition offers no resolution or consolation for the suffering soul, who is left to suffer in silent isolation. For Levinas, this does not lead to a more authentic form of subjectivity, nor does it in any way improve upon one's existential condition. To the contrary, it leads to a violent relationship with oneself marred by spiritual dissonance. Associating his philosophy with "the most unscrupulous and cynical forms of action," Levinas goes on to blame Kierkegaard for a trend in Western thought that has devalued morality, one that fails to understand the ethical as "the consciousness of a responsibility towards others" (Levinas,

34). Repeating these accusations in harsher “tones,” Levinas later accuses him of an “impulsive and violent style, reckless of scandal and destruction,” which “aspired to permanent provocation, and the total rejection of everything” (Levinas, 34).

Although Levinas makes some serious, and at times excessive,³⁷ accusations against Kierkegaard, his general attack demands attention. Is the ethical a transitory stage to be surpassed for the religious in Kierkegaard’s philosophy? In the same way that *Fear and Trembling* criticizes Hegel for reducing “the religious” to a stage in the process of human development, might one say the same of Kierkegaard regarding the ethical in his understanding of the dialectic? Furthermore, if the ethical is unimportant for Kierkegaard, one may also wonder whether Kierkegaard, as Heidegger claims, ought not to be considered a philosopher, but instead “a religious writer,”³⁸ in which case we may wonder whether Kierkegaard has anything at all to contribute to, not just ethics, but philosophy as a whole. In addition, does Kierkegaard’s philosophy overemphasize the “immanence” of the individual at the expense of the “the other”? However extreme Levinas’ attack, if Kierkegaard’s philosophy cannot respond to these questions, one should surely question his contributions to moral philosophy. In what follows, I will address these criticisms in hopes of bringing to light one of the more overlooked areas of Kierkegaard’s philosophy—*an ethical subjectivity that neither stifles nor rejects the individual, but instead edifies and strengthens one’s identity as it breaks forth in the existential dialectic of subjective becoming*. In addition, I hope to show that, like

³⁷ At one point, Levinas compares Kierkegaard’s “violent” philosophy to the evils of National Socialism (Levinas, 34).

³⁸ See Heidegger’s “The Word of Nietzsche: God is Dead” in *The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays* (1977, pg. 94).

Levinas, Kierkegaard places metaphysical primacy in the ethical relationship, and in particular, through relationships of deep love and commitment.

1.2 A Re-Reading of Kierkegaard's "Stages"

Critics like Levinas who attack Kierkegaard's philosophy on solipsistic (and even nihilistic) grounds seem to reach their conclusion through a particular understanding of Kierkegaard's philosophy of the stages. Despite the attention given to Kierkegaard's stages as a philosophical concept, there are few mentions in his authorship where he addresses "the stages" as a unified theory—his clearest insights found only in his private journals and papers.³⁹ For the most part, the stages are discussed individually through a particular pseudonym or, sometimes, in relation to *one* other stage, but rarely as a totality. Subsequently, interpreters take it upon themselves to piece together a philosophy of the stages through the various pseudonyms, with the conventional interpretation reporting that authentic individual existence requires a necessary, linear progression from the esthetic through the ethical, culminating in the religious.

Unfortunately, this interpretation oversimplifies Kierkegaard's understanding of subjective becoming into a philosophical methodology that he was seeking to challenge—a misreading that stems largely from the use of the word "stage." In the English (as well as the Danish) language the word stage suggests a transitory period that is to be overcome. Yet Kierkegaard never depicts stages in this manner, and we have no reason to posit the stages (as Levinas and others do) as a theory of developmental psychology. Preferring the use of the words "sphere" and "existence-sphere" over

³⁹ See in particular the journal entry entitled "The Relation between *Either/Or* and *Stages*" (JN, 224).

“stage” in his most mature account of this philosophy,⁴⁰ Kierkegaard instead depicts a “stage” as a lived modality that informs and defines an individual’s sense of self through a particular epistemological, metaphysical, and moral framework. Because spheres provide the basis for self-knowledge, it is not possible for the individual to abandon a sphere without abandoning his sense of self.

Contra Levinas, the stages are not to be viewed as periods in one’s life to be overcome for its successor, but instead as modes of being that build upon one another as the individual flourishes through deeper levels of inwardness and concern. For Kierkegaard, stages are not obliterated and conquered by successors, but are *encompassed* or *enveloped within* one another—the one component of the Hegelian dialectic that Kierkegaard accepts.⁴¹ In the second volume of *Either/Or*, Judge William makes clear in titles like “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage” and “The Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality” that authentic ethical existence requires that the “esthetic is preserved within the ethical” (E/O II, 9) in a manner where the esthetic lifestyle is lived “to an even higher degree” (E/O II, 139). Similarly, in both *Fear and Trembling* and the *Postscript*,⁴² the respective pseudonyms emphasize the role of the ethical within the religious, Kierkegaard referring to the deepest

⁴⁰ See “Stages on Life’s Way” (1845). For a thorough account of the distinction between Kierkegaard’s philosophy of the stages in *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life’s Way*, see Davenport’s “The Meaning of Kierkegaard’s Choice between the Esthetic and Ethical: A Response to MacIntyre” (2001).

⁴¹ The Hegelian dialectic posits that contradictory positions are reconciled in a higher unity (synthesis) where both are simultaneously annulled and preserved (*aufgehoben*) in the process. Similarly Kierkegaard’s existential-dialectic argues that the esthetic sphere is simultaneously annulled and preserved in the ethical and that the esthetic and the ethical must also be preserved in the religious. This quasi-Hegelian approach to the stages is found in Merold Westphal’s “Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard’s Concluding Unscientific Postscript” (1996).

⁴² “If the religious is in truth the religious, if it has submitted itself to the discipline of the ethical and preserves it within itself, it cannot forget the religious pathos does not consist in singing and hymning and composing verses, but in existing” (CUP, 247-48).

forms of the religious as the “ethico-religious life.”⁴³ Consequently, the ethical, like any other stage, is never abandoned in Kierkegaard’s philosophy of the stages, but something that is preserved and enriched in subsequent qualitative movements as the individual breaks forth in the existential dialectic.

Second, the spheres are by no means abstract universals to which individual existence is assimilated. Each stage is not an absolute category, but a lived worldview that represents a range of human possibility. In *Either/Or I*, Kierkegaard describes, not one, but multiple modes of the esthetic lifestyle, ranging from the wanton hedonism of Mozart’s Don Giovanni to the more refined and even calculated hedonism of ‘A’ and Johannes the seducer whose vices are limited to poetry, music, and philosophical reflection. In addition, we have the estheticism of Constantin Constantius and the Young Man in *Repetition*, who also represent variants of the esthetic worldview. Within the religious stage, we have a very specific type of religiosity represented by Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* and the more refined religiosity found in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), which distinguishes between religiousness B and religiousness A. In short, though many are quick to interpret the stages as absolute categories, it is better to view each sphere as a broader template upon which a multiplicity of human potentialities are possible.

In the same way that we must examine the esthetic and religious as a larger framework for a variety of types of existence, I want to argue the same of the ethical sphere. However, this argument is not as easy to make. Where Kierkegaard provides us

⁴³ See *Concluding Unscientific to the Philosophical Fragments* 294, 307, 359, 388-389, 396, 426, 428, 441-442, 476, 501-502.

with many different esthetic and religious exemplars throughout his authorship, the same cannot be said of the ethical. For the most part, when one mentions the term “ethical” in Kierkegaard, one thinks of Judge William. I will be discussing the Judge’s ethical theory in great detail in the next section, but for now I want to suggest that, in the same way that Don Giovanni represents one particular esthetic worldview, we must also say the same of the Judge regarding his existence-sphere—he represents *a* type of ethical existence, not *the* ethical. This model is hardly the same conception of the ethical as the “universal” (FT, 54) addressed in *Fear and Trembling*, and we have no reason to believe that it represents Kierkegaard’s entire treatment of the ethical. Instead, we find a theory of radical individuality that is critical of ethical theories that sacrifice the individual for the sake of rationality, order, or social prudence.

But perhaps the grandest and most deleterious misconception regarding the stages pertains to its teleological framework. For Levinas and many others, transition from one stage to another is a linear progression aimed at an absolute *telos*. Yet such a linear and systemized depiction of the stages is an affront to Kierkegaard’s philosophy as a whole. Kierkegaard’s entire philosophical mission is an attempt to undermine systematic and objective approaches to existence that devalue and dehumanize subjectivity to mere cogs in the machine of some universal, rational scheme. Mocking the “1, 2, 3 dance step” of the Hegelian dialectic (R, 226)—i.e., the systematic movement towards truth in Hegel’s philosophy from thesis to antithesis to synthesis—Constantin Constantius in *Repetition* pokes fun at the mechanical depictions of subjective truth that generalize the complexities of morality into a universal and necessary process. Such an approach to truth trivializes the individual ethical project, assimilating individual choice and personal moral

development into the grand development of universal rational truth—a “tawdry substitute for the proper goal of continuing individuation” (Caputo, 286). Of course, Kierkegaard’s attack in *Repetition* is not just against Hegel, but against all of the larger, systematic philosophies of the 19th century—especially Kant’s. In the same way that the Hegelian dialectic reduces human purpose to the driving force of absolute spirit, Kant’s categorical imperative reduces the individual to his or her obligation to the rational commands of humanity through the categorical imperative.⁴⁴

One cannot approach the stages as necessary moments or movements in time progressing in a linear fashion towards some absolute *telos*. The subject embodies the stages, *and not the reverse*, as Hegel and other rationalists argue. Furthermore, linearity cannot be an adequate quality of existential movement insofar as the linear is construed as a quantitative idea. Linearity implies a continuous movement between points, yet, “Kierkegaard discovered that it is impossible to carry through a continuous movement either in thought or in existence ... Thought and existence encounter very definite limits, and the next level or next sphere cannot be reached without a leap.”⁴⁵ In short, the jumps, breaks, and fractures so essential to human development are inconceivable from any conventional notion of linearity, and moments of conversion, which Kierkegaard was primarily interested in, *can be understood only in terms of a break from linearity*. If there is any continuous movement in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, it does not move forward or backward, but *inward*, and it is *this unique inwardness that is at the core of his ethical investigation*.

⁴⁴ As was the case with Hegel, Kierkegaard did not completely reject all aspects of Kant’s philosophy. For a very thorough account of Kant’s influence upon Kierkegaard’s philosophy, see Ronald Green’s *Kierkegaard and Kant: The Hidden Debt* (1992).

⁴⁵ Hong in her commentary on Kierkegaard’s *Journals and Papers*, Pastmasters, V.3, L3.

To better clarify this unique sort of inward movement, let us turn to one of those few areas of the corpus where Kierkegaard directly explains the stages as a unified theory.

There are three existence spheres: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious. The metaphysical is abstraction, and there is no human who exists metaphysically. The metaphysical, the ontological, is, but it does not exist, for when it exists it does so in the esthetic, in the ethical, in the religious, and when it is, it is the abstraction from a prius [prior thing] to the esthetic, the ethical, the religious ... The esthetic sphere is the sphere of immediacy, the ethical the sphere of requirement (and this requirement is so infinite that the individual always goes bankrupt), the religious the sphere of fulfillment, but, please note, not a fulfillment such as when one fills an alms box or a sack of gold, for repentance has specifically created a boundless space, and as a consequence the religious contradiction: simultaneously to be out on 70,000 fathoms of water and yet be joyful. Just as the ethical sphere is a passageway—which one nevertheless does not pass through once and for all—just as repentance is its expression, so repentance is the most dialectical (SLW, 476-477).

Reiterating his distaste for metaphysical abstractions of humanity, Kierkegaard argues that metaphysics and ontology are derivative categories of existential investigation. He then goes on to disclose the unique teleological framework of the stages, one that differs greatly from the understanding of his critics. Where Levinas depicts the stages as something to be completed and conquered, Kierkegaard here portrays them as *ongoing*, *continuous*, and *incomplete*. Contrasting the religious stage to the finiteness of “an alms box or a sack of gold,” “fulfillment” within the religious is “boundlessly” infinite. Whether we take the Judge to be speaking of the infinity of God’s Kingdom or the infinite nature of the religious sphere in general, it is made clear that the project of individual fulfillment possesses a certain eternal nature insofar as it is ongoing and continuous. Likewise, the ethical stage, “which one nevertheless does not pass through once and for all” is not to be conceived as a destination or goal that is reached and

subsequently abandoned. For Kierkegaard, a stage is never completed or overcome, but a “boundless space” of development that is embodied and acquired by the individual. From this interpretation, the stages appear conceptually similar to Aristotle’s notion of human virtue (*arête*). In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines virtue as capacity acquired by the moral agent. Human virtue for Aristotle is something that is continuously worked on throughout moral development, acquired and instilled in the soul through repeated action. Similarly, Kierkegaard conceives the stages as something to be acquired by the individual over time and incorporated into subjective existence. A transition from one stage to another is never “an abstraction from some previous thing,” but part of the ongoing project that is the individual’s primary task. It is for this reason that “life views” or “existence spheres” do seem much of an improvement over “stages of existence”—the former signifying a lived embodiment, and not, as the latter suggests, a mere phase that is ultimately passed beyond. Each “sphere” is an inseparable component of existence and each reflects a different modification of a substance in a state of perpetual becoming and development.

We now have a better understanding of Kierkegaard’s spheres and how critics like Levinas, through a faulty existential and teleological framework, come to erroneously characterize Kierkegaardian subjectivity. The stages are not discrete abstract categories, but lived modalities inseparable from the subject. Furthermore, a transition from one stage to another does not destroy, but renews, its predecessor under a singular anthropological project.

There remains one last claim from the Levinas camp that requires attention, namely the idea that Kierkegaard’s anthropology is harmful and “violent” to existence. If

Kierkegaard's project aims at self-actualization, but in the end is self-destructive and cannibalistic and hopelessly tragic, one would surely appeal to a different philosopher than Kierkegaard for a compelling ethics. Levinas' primary attack is against Kierkegaard's existential framework, which, characterized by perpetual conflict and struggle, lacks resolution. However, Kierkegaard would readily agree with this assessment. Breaking from traditional Western conceptions of self that situates personhood in some singular immutable soul, Kierkegaard portrays the individual as a *becoming*, as a flourishing, as a being who is a continual project for itself: "One who is existing is continually in the process of becoming; the actually existing subjective thinker, thinking, continually reproduces this in his existence and invests all his thinking in becoming..." (CUP, 86). As mentioned earlier, part of Kierkegaard's philosophical project was to free subjectivity from the objective rationalistic framework that had come to dilute the true richness of existence. For Kierkegaard, the essence of subjective existence lies in the fact that subjectivity is always "on the way," i.e., a becoming. Where Hegel proposes a similar metaphysical framework—his dialectic portraying reality as a continual progression between conflicting principles—unlike Hegel, Kierkegaard's metaphysics finds no tidy resolution or synthesis.

Kierkegaard's fundamental contribution to Western thought is an ontology that does not explain away the primordial conflict between body and soul. Like many of his predecessors, Kierkegaard adopts a dualistic anthropological framework consisting of a finite, material body on the one hand, and an immutable, immaterial soul on the other. However, whereas thinkers such as Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and Descartes all identify self with soul—the body for most is an inessential component of self—Kierkegaard

argues that existence is grounded in *both* body and soul and can be only understood as a being that seeks to understand itself as a fractured and duplicitous being. “But what is existence? Existence is the child that is born of the infinite and the finite, the eternal and temporal, and is therefore a constant striving...” (CA, 85). The real value of existence for Kierkegaard lies in the struggle associated with the paradox of existence, i.e., in coming to terms with both temporal and infinite aspects of existence. Where Aristotle rightly acknowledges both aspects of self, unlike Aristotle, Kierkegaard does not attempt to mollify the tension between these two dueling principles, instead suggesting that authentic existence requires the existence of the body within the spiritual. But, does this struggle cause harm or violence to the soul?

For Kierkegaard, existence is undoubtedly “violent” in the sense that the individual, characterized by an irreconcilable conflict, is at perpetual odds with herself. However, this relationship is not cannibalistic as Levinas suggests. In *Sickness Unto Death* (1849), Kierkegaard argues that the individual is a relationship relating to itself.

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way a human being is still not a self (SUD, 13).

Kierkegaard's contribution to philosophy is also one of the greatest philosophical problems of modernity—the idea that the self is no singular thing, but is instead a relationship with itself that is in a perpetual striving to understand itself. The individual cannot be understood as a purely physical or purely spiritual being, but only as a being

that is defined by his inner alterity. This alterity, however, is not, as Socrates, Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, and Descartes argue, an antagonistic conflict between two completely different substances, but two parts of a singular movement, a *kinesis*. As the individual emerges as an individual through this perpetual transcendence, he works towards understanding himself as a being that is fundamentally relational. However, this pursuit of self-knowledge in the face of one's alterity is by no means *harmful to the self*. To the contrary, Kierkegaard's philosophy provides a more robust conception of the human person that works to strengthen and deepen one's sense of self as it strives to be a more authentic person. Of course, to persist along the path towards subjectivity is by no means easy and Kierkegaard in no way attempts to romanticize such a task, which is fraught with uncertainty and anxiety: "The perpetual process of becoming is the uncertainty of earthly life, in which everything is uncertain" (CUP, 86). The individual is not provided with an absolute *telos*, and the task of staking a *telos* for oneself is not only daunting but downright undesirable. "The ethical will always have its task" (E/O II, 139), and in the face of the seemingly infinite possibilities of existence that one can embark upon, the individual is left alone to choose what sort of life to live. Kierkegaard compares the solitude of human striving to "being joyful" out on 70,000 fathoms of water, a solitude that is simultaneously horrifying and blissful. For those who decide to persist in the struggle towards subjectivity, the rewards will be infinite, for it is in the struggle and suffering that the individual comes to define and understand his subjectivity.

Now that we have a better understanding of Kierkegaard's unique existential framework, and more importantly, why his accusers have come to wrongly identify his philosophy with nihilism, we can now begin our examination of Kierkegaard's ethical

theory. While Kierkegaard does put forth a very intriguing ethic of the subject, does he, as Levinas asserts, altogether ignore the value of the other? What we will see is that, against Levinas, Kierkegaard is as concerned with the state of the individual as he is with the existence of other people. Although Kierkegaard's understanding of the self is based upon an "inner alterity," more authentic notions of self can arise only in temporal relationships with other people. For Kierkegaard, subjective truth is never revealed to the individual apart from a relational context, whether it be with another individual, as Judge William argues in *Either/Or II*, or in a relationship with God, as Kierkegaard argues in his later works.

1.3 How to Read Kierkegaard's Pseudonymous Authorship

One of the major difficulties in coming to understand Kierkegaard's ethics is the fact that his corpus contains no *Nicomachean Ethics*, no *Metaphysics of Morals*, no *Philosophy of Right*. Although Kierkegaard was unquestionably concerned with ethical questions, he nowhere sets forth a comprehensive account of the ethical, or even what he means by the word "ethical"—instead leaving the reader the daunting task of piecing together his widely dispersed ethical insights from the thousands of pages that constitute his corpus. Adding to the complexity is the fact that his unconventional "indirect" and pseudonymous writing style presents views often not attributed to Kierkegaard, but to the pseudonyms, leaving the reader to speculate as to which, if any, of these figures represents Kierkegaard's own view on ethics. In short, because he does not present his ethical philosophy in any traditional and systematic manner, and, given the lack of a singular work devoted to ethics in his corpus, many wonder to what degree we should consider him part of the tradition of moral philosophers.

Yet, to expect Kierkegaard to present an all encompassing systematic ethical theory in the manner of Kant, Hegel, or Mill is entirely to misunderstand him, his philosophy, and his methodology. Like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard believed that philosophy had become overly technical and, as a result, had lost sight of its subject matter—reducing truth, and more importantly, subjective truth, to the sterile and delimiting categories of the essentialist tradition. For Kierkegaard, the job of the philosopher is not to tell the reader what truth is, but instead to get him to engage with a particular philosophical problem so that he may reach a self-knowledge that is his own. Consequently, Kierkegaard's asystematic style—his polyphonous and indirect authorship—possesses a maieutic value, poking and prodding the reader into examining a variety of worldviews through a variety of characters in hopes of inciting some form of self-knowledge for its reader.

That said, when examining ethics (or any philosophical idea) in Kierkegaard's indirect and pseudonymous authorship, it is essential to approach each author, and each character, as representing one particular understanding of the ethical, none of which can be considered to have any supreme authority, for “the device of pseudonymity insures that this imperial authority is explicitly erased” (Mooney, 8). As both Taylor (1989) and Mooney (1996) rightly argue, the true philosophical genius underlying the polyphonous writing device is the fact that such a style is largely free and unfettered from any one particular worldview, agenda, or authority, which, to return to the primary problem at hand—namely the modern moral crisis—is precisely the idea that Kierkegaard wanted us to reflect upon. Given the fact that there is no absolute framework to view the world, how ought I to live? If there is no supreme authority, i.e., if God, as Nietzsche remarks,

is dead,⁴⁶ how am I to understand myself and from what ethical framework ought I to base my decisions? From this reading, our own author's authority during the early pseudonymous authorship must also be removed from the equation, and this seems to be Kierkegaard's own predilection with such a style, for it freed him from the constraints of adhering to any one particular philosophical worldview. Consequently, when the reader asks, "what does Kierkegaard believe about ethics?" he is presupposing that the pseudonymous works are written from the perspective of an ultimate moral authority to which all the other views are to be compared, which, again, contradicts the purpose of the indirect methodology.

This, of course, brings us to one of the most hotly debated questions for interpreters of the early authorship: What is Kierkegaard's role in these works and how are we to understand his ideas in relation to the various pseudonyms? While I think Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche, would encourage various interpretations of his philosophy—and the pseudonymous nature of the authorship demands this of the reader—the *relationship between Kierkegaard and these figures in the early writings is clear.*

As is well-known, my authorship has two parts: one pseudonymous and the other signed. The pseudonymous writers are poetic creations, poetically maintained so that everything they say is in character with their poetized individualized personalities; sometimes I have carefully explained in a signed preface my own interpretation of what the pseudonym said. Anyone with just a fragment of common sense will perceive that it would be ludicrously confusing to attribute to me everything the poetized characters say. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, I have expressly urged that anyone who quotes something from the pseudonyms

⁴⁶ Though Kierkegaard was a devout believer in God, I think that he would wholeheartedly agree with the Madman's claim in *The Gay Science* that "God is dead" (sec. 125). Nietzsche's claim is more of an epistemological claim about conventional conceptions of truth and the nihilism of his day, rather than any theological assertion regarding God's metaphysical nature. Like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard also seems to lament God's death and the nihilism of the present age. See in particular, *The Present Age* (1846).

will not attribute the quotation to me (see my postscript to Concluding Postscript). It is easy to see that anyone wanting to have a literary lark merely needs to take some verbatim quotations from 'The Seducer,' then from Johannes Climacus, then from me, etc., print them together as if they were all my words, show how they contradict each other, and create a very chaotic impression, as if the author were a kind of lunatic. Hurrah! That can be done. In my opinion anyone who exploits the poetic in me by quoting the writings in a confusing way is more or less a charlatan or a literary toper. (JP X 6b 145, 1851)

While I don't disagree with commentators who suggest that some of the pseudonyms are more reputable than others in their relationship to Kierkegaard's own philosophy, the idea that we should read the early authorship exclusively in a manner that attempts to reconcile Kierkegaard's views with that of the characters in these works removes the maieutic value of these writings. Whether or not Kierkegaard's own beliefs align with that of the figures in his works is irrelevant. The majority of the early works were highly experimental in nature, and Kierkegaard defines himself during this era an "experimenting psychologist."⁴⁷ Though Kierkegaard's personal experiment during the early authorship can be viewed as the vehicle for him to thrash out his own philosophical uncertainties, *Kierkegaard's own authority during this period has no special significance*. As stated in the introduction, the early works represent a period of tremendous existential uncertainty for Kierkegaard, and as such, have no particular agenda. Instead, these writings serve more as an experimental laboratory, whose characters afford him the freedom to play with several ideas without committing to any particular worldview. Though some of these ideas would become more refined in his later non-pseudonymous works, to read the early authorship from the perspective of reconciling Kierkegaard's

⁴⁷ See in particular *Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology* (1843).

views with the pseudonyms is incredibly misguided.⁴⁸ *Instead, the real experiment of his early authorship takes place in the imagination of the readers of his works*, who, like its author, are free to experiment with the various pseudonyms as an unbiased observer apart from any singular authority. Kierkegaard presents us with multiple perspectives and approaches to the ethical, and we cannot read any one of these, including our author's, as having any special authority from which others can be assessed. Instead, the reader who engages in the dialogical interplay of these multiple perspectives will emerge with his own questions and his own ideas, which may or may not be consistent with that of the author.

1.4 “The Ethical” in Kierkegaard

Having worked out the framework to read Kierkegaard's ethics, it is nonetheless important to distinguish between three very different conceptions of the ethical in his authorship so that the reader, in his own dialogical engagement with the text and its characters, reaps the full benefits of the pseudonymous authorship's maieutic value. The first (1) and most basic usage of the term “ethical” in Kierkegaard's authorship refers to an understanding of “the ethical as the universal”—a catch-all term for modern rationalism used equivocally by the pseudonyms to represent conventional approaches to modern morality as a whole. Although Kierkegaard distinguishes between at least two types of universal ethics,⁴⁹ generally speaking the “ethical” in this sense refers to that which “applies to everyone, which can be put from another point of view by saying that it

⁴⁸ See for instance Adorno (1933) and Croxall (1954), who suggest that the pseudonyms and their ideas are selfsame with Kierkegaard's own beliefs.

⁴⁹ In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard's conception of the ethical as is largely based upon Hegel's universalized “Philosophy of Right” and in particular the idea that morality is grounded in social values (*Sittlichkeit*) which gains its value through the dialectical mediation of absolute spirit of Geist. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard seems to speak of the universal (*ethike*) with regard to the Kantian categorical imperative.

applies at every moment” (FT, 83). When defined in this way, the ethical is understood as some ideal or norm to which the individual must align or sacrifice himself to, be it the demands of rationality or society. This conception of the ethical is that which is “teleologically suspended” in *Fear and Trembling*—the approach to morality that is embraced and celebrated by Agamemnon, Brutus, Iphigenia, whose murderous actions (contra Abraham) are justifiable within the framework of some greater good, namely social utility. The (2) second usage of the ethical for Kierkegaard refers to his ethical sphere, a somewhat technical philosophical term in his philosophy that designates a general worldview centered on a living according to ethical values, and in particular a worldview centered on a normative distinction between the “good” and the “bad.” The most comprehensive account of ethical existence sphere is provided by Judge William in both *Either/Or II* and *Stages on Life’s Way*, where Kierkegaard, through the Judge, offers the ethical sphere as an alternative to the existentially unsatisfying nature of the esthete’s character. The paradigmatic model for Kierkegaard’s general ethical stage is a loving marriage, which the Judge spends the majority of his time discussing. Although most commentators are inclined to place the Judge amongst the ranks of Brutus, Iphigenia, and Agamemnon, Judge William’s understanding of the ethical has little in common with “universalized” conceptions of the ethical. Contra the tragic hero and the knight of infinite resignation, the Judge proposes a radical individualism centered upon self-discipline, responsibility, personhood, and the idea of choosing and gaining oneself.

The Judge’s theory will be examined in great detail in the following section, but of significance now is the distinction between the Judge’s account of the ethical on the one hand, and the ethical existence sphere in general. Although Kierkegaard always uses

the Judge as a vehicle to discuss the ethical existence sphere, like other characters in his works, the Judge represents but one instance of a broader ethical template and cannot be construed as having any particular authority in his authorship. From the reader's perspective, I want to suggest that the Judge works better when examined as one of the many dialogical components of Kierkegaard's maieutic, but in particular in relation to the (3) third usage of "the ethical" in Kierkegaard's philosophy, namely his conception of the ethical as an authentic human state (Tilvøelrelsen). As argued in the introduction, Kierkegaard is more of an ethical philosopher in the vein of Aristotle, focusing on the cultivation of individual character over following particular moral rules or commands. Although Kierkegaard offers a brand of eudaimonism distinct from Aristotle, like Aristotle he sees the inherent value of the ethical life with regard to human happiness.⁵⁰ This account of the ethical is most explicitly examined through Johannes Climacus in one of the later pseudonymous works, namely *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, but it also surfaces indirectly in the background of the early pseudonymous authorship's experimental laboratory, and most especially in his *Repetition*. As Kierkegaard works out his understanding of the ethical in his philosophical laboratory through the interplay of the various pseudonyms, free from any one particular agenda, the reader is witness to Kierkegaard's own reflections on the ethical, which, though not fully formed, offer significant philosophical insight into morality and ethics. Like other instances of the ethical, this particular instance is to have no special authority in Kierkegaard's philosophy. Yet, like the others, with regard to understanding Kierkegaard's ethical project, it offers an interesting theory in comparison to the Judge's, one which enriches the reader's own understanding of the

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard associates authentic ethical existence with "blessedness," "contentment," and "joy."

ethical. Reading these texts from the perspective of our experimenter provides the reader with one additional figure to incorporate into the interplay of the pseudonymous authorship—one that reveals the incredibly fertile ground from which his philosophy of repetition emerges. For the reader paying attention to this thread of the discussion, an ethical subjectivity is revealed that has gone largely overlooked by most commentators—an ethics based upon a unique self-knowledge centered on temporality, love and, repetition.

1.5 *Either/Or*

Either/Or is of particular importance to this dissertation because it contains the core principles of Kierkegaard's well-known "ethical stage." Marking the beginning of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship, *Either/Or* presents five different writers: an individual known simply as 'A', Johannes the Seducer (the author of the infamous "Seducer's Diary"), Judge William, the Parson, and Victor Eremita. Victor Eremita, the editor of the text, claims to have found the work in an old second hand writing desk when, in a fit of rage, he smashed it up with an axe. When he came to read the contents of these documents, he found that the manuscripts represented two opposed views of life. The first, presented by 'A' (and Johannes the seducer), depicts the esthetic worldview, i.e., the life of "immediacy" devoted to the pursuit of pleasure. The second, presented by Judge William, depicts the ethical worldview, i.e., the life devoted to right conduct. In short, *Either/Or* poses Plato and Aristotle's traditional ethical question, "how ought I to live?" The work provides no definitive answer to this question, leaving many to believe that the text functions primarily as an exercise in Socratic self-knowledge.

Yet, most readers find a clear motive in *Either/Or*. Of the two worldviews presented, it is obvious to many that, in comparison to the ethical, the esthetic life lacks substance and meaning.

Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry and you will also regret it. Marry or do not marry, you will regret it either way. Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them and you will also regret it. Laugh at the stupidities of the world or weep over them, you will regret it either way....Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her and you will also regret it. Whether you trust a girl or do not trust her, you will regret it either way. Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself and you will also regret it. Hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way. Whether you hang yourself or do not hang yourself, you will regret it either way (E/O I, 38-39).

The fact that the esthete believes that all decisions lead to regret reveals a life that is devoid of true meaning. The esthete lacks meaning because he lacks a sense of self, i.e., he lacks an anchor that will allow for the gaining of existential weight—the major requirement for authentic existence in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. As a result the Judge argues that esthetic life can yield nothing but “despair.” The ethical life, on the other hand, in emphasizing life lived according to commitment and responsibility, provides meaning and value through a more stable foundation, namely living life according to the “good” and the “bad.” Because no rational argument is given by ‘A’ in favor of the esthetic life, and the Judge clearly addresses these limitations, many interpret *Either/Or* as a defense of the ethical life.

Unfortunately, there remains no general consensus amongst interpreters of Kierkegaard with regard to the classification of Judge William’s ethics. For some, the universalized duty-bound nature of Judge William’s teachings is distinctly Kantian.⁵¹ For

⁵¹ See MacIntyre (1984) and Green (1993).

others, the Judge's emphasis on adherence to social mores is Hegelian.⁵² At the same time, existentialists,⁵³ virtue ethicists⁵⁴ and pragmatists⁵⁵ alike have also claimed the Judge for their own. While elements of said theories can be located in the Judge's teachings, the uniqueness of his ethical theory defies categorization, at least in any conventional sense. Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, Judge William is not a moral absolutist. Because many have come to associate the Judge's teachings with Kantianism, most interpret him as a proponent of the universalized ethical model that is called into question in *Fear and Trembling*. William clearly admired and was undoubtedly influenced by Kant. However, the ethical theory in *Either/Or II* portrays a theory altogether different from Kant's "rationalist," "duty-bound" philosophy, namely an ethical subjectivity emphasizing the becoming of the individual. In the following section, I present the key ideas underlying the Judge's teachings in *Either/Or II*, a work where I find Kierkegaard, through the Judge, making his first foray into the ethical laboratory.

The second volume of *Either/Or* is composed of two letters: "The Esthetic Validity of Marriage" and "The Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality." In these two letters the Judge aims at convincing the esthete of the true value of the ethical life, which, William argues, is best embodied through marital love. Judge William's methodology aims to demonstrate that the esthetic life is by no means abandoned in the ethical life. To the contrary, within marriage, the esthetic is lived to an "even higher degree." Together, both letters argue two general

⁵² See Stewart (2003) and Dooley (2001).

⁵³ See Sartre (1943) and Stack (1976).

⁵⁴ See Davenport (2001) and Roberts (2008).

⁵⁵ See Mehl (1986)

points: (1) “that romantic love can be united with and exist in marriage” (E/O II, 37), and (2) that the richness of the ethical life far surpass that of the esthetic.

Though most read this second volume as a defense of marriage per se, I suggest that Kierkegaard’s praise of marriage through the Judge serves a different purpose. Kierkegaard deeply admired the ideal of “authentic” marriage, and his infamous engagement to and subsequent break from Regina Olsen was, according to his journals, a result of his inability to maintain the level of dedication and commitment required for a healthy and loving marriage. Kierkegaard saw in marriage the possibility for an ethical framework that could provide the basis for relationships with others, and even God. Because marriage requires that one have a proper understanding of another individual as a temporal being, i.e., as a being who will change, Kierkegaard views authentic marriage as a proper way to understanding other people. In addition, Kierkegaard believed that the context of authentic marital love was a very fertile environment for the character-building virtues he found so essential to existence such as steadfastness, faithfulness, patience, modesty, and tolerance (E/O II, 139). The greatest virtue of all in Kierkegaard’s ethics is love, which for him has the power of synthesizing the duplicitous and fractured subject that is the human person as well as helping us to understand how to relate to others. The message of the second volume of *Either/Or* is not that everyone should marry. Instead, I interpret him as working out the basic conditions of his own ethical theory through an inter-subjective relationship based in love.

a. “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage”

In the first letter, the Judge spends much of his time taking to task A's depiction of marriage in the first volume of *Either/Or*, which is portrayed as monotonous and boring. The Judge is not naive and does not overly romanticize marriage. He knows all too well that many marriages are characterized by boredom and unhappiness and, of "...those wretched husbands who sit and lament that love vanished from their marriage long ago; those husbands who, as you once said of them, sit like lunatics, eat in his marital cubicle, slave away in chains, and fantasize about the sweetness of engagement and the bitterness of marriage" (E/O II, 32-33). Such individuals are "traitors" to marriage, who cannot be said to represent true and authentic marital love. True marital love is a struggle requiring great effort, but the riches of such a struggle far exceed any gained in "first" love. For 'A' the riches of love are contained in the early stages of a relationship, during the courting and engagement period, what the Judge refers to as *erotic* or *first* love. Once the novelty of first love passes—which for 'A' occurs soon after the honeymoon—so does the love. The Judge, on the other hand, conceives the object of love as something much more permanent, for the primary object of love for William is the self.

The esthete experiences the world primarily through the immediacy of the moment as well as the immediacy of reflection. For this reason, romantic love "lends itself much better to artistic portrayal than marital love" (E/O II, 139). The visual arts have the uncanny ability to capture the moment, but in reality the moment "cannot be stretched out in time," cannot be held onto. In order for romantic love to "succeed," it requires an "outer history," which, like art, is constructed by the "visible symbols" of esthetic life. However, such a relationship is no longer grounded in the moment or the

immediacy of erotic love, but in the memories of the earlier stages of the relationship—“the charm of the first kiss, the first embrace” (Caputo, 28). Yet, as already stated, the fleeting nature of the esthetic lifestyle can result only in despair. Without a stable conception of self, without a history, the esthete will find no true value or meaning in life: “Since you are in fact fighting for the moment against time, you actually are always fighting for what has disappeared” (E/O II, 141). The ethical person, on the other hand, is guided by the ability to make long-term commitments. The decision to marry reflects a long-term commitment not only to another individual, but also to oneself. Such a commitment possesses a historical and temporal value that the esthete lacks, namely a life lived together in time. In short, the esthete never chooses and is hence not really living.

True marital love is grounded in history, in time, and no moment within marriage can be conceived of as an isolated point in time, but only as an “extension” of time. Each moment within marital love is a manifestation of an entire history together, a history that includes not only those more memorable moments of first love so cherished by the esthete, but also the mundane—sitting quietly together in the morning or taking an evening walk. But the historical nature of marital love is not to be conceived as a collection of events or moments, for marriage is an *active* temporal progression. Marriage, as portrayed by the Judge is a becoming, something always on the way: “Marriage takes days and years to blossom” (E/O II, 96) and, contrary to romantic love, which is “inert,” marital love is “alive,” requiring both individuals actively pursuing and working towards its acquisition. Marital love for William is not something to be rationalized or analyzed, but lived! “Let your consolation be, as it is mine, that we are not to read about or listen to or look at what is the highest and the most beautiful in life,

but are, if you please, to live it” (E/O II, 139). Thus, ethics for Kierkegaard was not a subject to be theorized about in classrooms, but applied in the real world through concrete action. But it is this action that creates a history, which the esthete lacks. Subsequently, he also lacks a conception of self.

Despite this very vibrant notion of marriage, the true ethical riches of marital love are imperceptible to the outsider:

...An ideal married man of this sort cannot be portrayed, for the point is time in its extension.... For him his possession has not been inert property, but he has been continually acquiring its possession (E/O II, 138).

That which is acquired has no external manifestation, which is why the married man, fifteen years into marriage, appears to have undergone no change or movement. The riches of marital love are *inner* qualifications that edify and strengthen the individual soul—qualifications such as faithfulness, constancy, humbleness, patience, long-suffering, tolerance, honesty, contentedness, perseverance, willingness, and happiness (E/O II, 139). The central quality of these virtues for the Judge is that “they always have in them the qualification of time,” i.e., they are never “once and for all,” but they are “continually.” On this reading, the Judge’s theory, grounded in the acquisition of virtue, takes on a distinctly Aristotelian tone. Much like Aristotle, the Judge approaches ethics as a continuous activity according to virtue. The task of becoming ethical, i.e., finding, learning and living by one’s most passionate beliefs, is the very essence of existence for both the Judge and Kierkegaard. In coming to acquire inner virtues of selfness, the self becomes the person he or she is to become: “The individual is not fighting against external enemies but is struggling with himself, struggling to bring his love out of

himself” (E/O II, 139). By cultivating inner virtues, the self by loving is drawn out of himself, progressing towards the self that he is to become.

The primary distinction between the erotic and marital lover is that each takes a different approach to temporality. Where the romantic lover views time as something to be “killed,” marital love has a proper relation to temporality and eternity, for “marital love is an eternity of which one never wearies” (E/O II, 112). The Judge remarks:

Like a true victor, the married man has not killed time, but has rescued and preserved it in eternity. The married man who does this is truly living poetically; he solves the great riddle, to live in eternity and yet to hear the cabinet clock strike in such a way that its striking does not shorten but lengthens his eternity... (E/O II, 138).

Eternity for the Judge is not “merely the infinite succession of time,” but is an “immanent reality, experienced, not after death, but within transcendent moments of terrestrial experience” (Green 85-86), possessed and preserved *in* time. Elaborating on the human existence as in the image of the Divine, traditional Judeo-Christian notion of eternity, Kierkegaard here, through Judge William, asserts that the riches of the ethical life do not come in the form of some reward to be reached or acquired in the future, but *here* and *now* in this world. Incorporating elements of both Aristotle’s ethics and metaphysics, the Judge argues for a lived ethical theory that is *complete at every moment* yet always on the way towards the future. The esthete, living merely from moment to moment, lacks vision and direction in his life. Because the esthete has nothing to hope for in the future, his life ceases to move forward. The married man, on the other hand, views existence as an ongoing project of a life lived together in-time-for-eternity. The Judge’s notion of eternity, however, is not some destination to be reached in the future, but is instead complete at every moment. Although there is no absolute *telos* in the Judge’s ethical

theory, a space is opened for each individual to actualize his or her individual ethical project in time. Contrary to the backward-looking approach to self to which the esthete will ultimately succumb, the ethical approach to existence is forward-looking and hopeful.

Where the Judge emphasizes an ethical theory that looks ahead into the future, he also acknowledges the value of “recollection”:

The healthy individual lives simultaneously in hope and in recollection, and only thereby does his life gain true and substantive continuity. Thus he has hope and therefore does not wish to go backward in time, as do those who live only in recollection... This has also found expression in a very beautiful way in marital life (E/O II, 142).

Authentic ethical existence requires a comprehensive approach to temporality that conceives one’s past, present, and future as a temporal whole. Because the self is depicted as a temporal unity, the individual is provided with “substantive continuity” upon which ethical existence is grounded.

As the first letter comes to a close, the Judge continues his attacks upon the esthete’s approach to temporality, arguing for a completely new understanding of time and, more specifically, *repetition*:

The source of your unhappiness is that you locate the essence of love simply and solely in these visible symbols...for if what gave them validity was the condition of being the first time, then a repetition is indeed an impossibility. But true love has an utterly different value; it does its work in time and therefore will be able to renew itself in these external signs and has—this is my main point—a completely different idea of time and of the meaning of repetition (E/O II, 141).

The esthete lacks a true conception of time because he lacks a notion of self, and this is precisely “the source of his unhappiness.” Having a self is having a history, a present,

past, and future. As stated earlier, the ephemeral nature of esthetic love, grounded exclusively in the “visible symbols” of existence (the memories of first love), is incapable of providing any true meaning for the individual. No esthetic experience can be perfectly reduplicated, for the object of the esthete’s love, existing externally, cannot be possessed. In the end, the esthete possesses nothing save the visions of first love that have long since passed. Although the esthetic life is physically and psychologically demanding, there is no payout, only despair—a point both the Judge and the esthete acknowledge. Ultimately, the esthete’s life will reach stagnation, clinging to the fading memories of moments that do not belong to him.

The true lover, on the other hand, possesses her object, for she works “in time” to acquire it. The value of the ethical for the Judge, as well as Kierkegaard, is internal, and that which is possessed by the true lover *is the self*, for the ethical principles that are acquired in true love shape individual character. In acquiring the virtues of marriage one is staking an identity for oneself in the form of concrete beliefs and convictions. Like the esthetic life, the ethical life is psychologically and physically demanding. However, the payout for the ethical life is invaluable, for the payout is “self.” Unlike the passive self of the esthetic life driven by pleasure, the self in pursuit of the ethical life takes himself as a project to be continually renewed in time, an existential movement “in which the original is increased” (E/O II, 142). As we will soon see, authentic repetition occurs in an existential movement where the individual simultaneously gives up, and receives back himself in a continuous ethical becoming.

When the smoke settles at the end of the first letter, a radical subjectivity is revealed that calls for a new approach to temporality and movement in relation to the

ethical. The Judge grounds his ethics in the individual conceived as a project to be actualized in time through the acquisition of “inner qualifications.” The “reward” of the ethical life is not something to be acquired at some future point in time or in the afterlife, but obtained here and now in the form of subjective edification, an idea both Plato and Aristotle would embrace. Such an approach to the ethical requires a comprehensive approach to temporality that views one’s past, present, and future as a singular existential project.

While many at this point would contend that the Judge’s depiction of the ethical in this first letter is far too subjective, such a criticism overlooks the fact that the exemplary ethical paradigm discussed here, marriage, is grounded in the other. The virtues that the Judge depicts as edifying to the soul—honesty, patience, contentment—are virtues acquired through a collective struggle within the commitment of a relationship. One acquires virtues such as patience and honesty through engaging in deep and meaningful relationships with others. Furthermore, the essential virtue of the second letter is *love*. Although the Judge has yet to delineate philosophically his conception of love, it is obvious that the Judge’s ethics are inseparable from his notion of love.

Nonetheless, the ethical theory put forth in the first letter, however exciting and vibrant, cannot stand on its own. Although the Judge lays the basic conditions required for an ethical subjectivity, the specifics are lacking and many questions are left open, in particular questions pertaining to the acquisition of virtue. Does Kierkegaard believe virtues are innate in the soul, or are they somehow acquired? Also, what is the metaphysical nature of this Heraclitean self always on the way? What is it that progresses? With these questions in mind, we turn to the second and final letter of the

second volume, “The Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical In the Development of Personality.”

b. The Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical In the Development of Personality

The aim of the first letter of *Either/Or II* is to convince the esthete that the riches of the ethical worldview far surpass those of the esthetic. The purely esthetic life lacks existential meaning and will ultimately result in despair. The ethical life, on the other hand, preserves the esthetic while helping the individual understand itself as a relational being. In the second letter, the Judge begins to fill out the details of the ethical life that the first lacked, namely *how one goes about pursuing and acquiring the good*. For Judge William, the essential element of the ethical is *choice*.

Generally speaking, the title *Either/Or* is a reference to the two types of life presented in the work, the esthetic (the “either”) and the ethical (the “or”), and the work enjoins the reader to *choose* between these worldviews. As the second letter begins, William remarks on those “whose souls are too dissolute to comprehend the implications of such a dilemma, whose personalities lack the energy to be able to say with pathos: *Either/Or*” (E/O II, 157). For the Judge (as well as Kierkegaard), choice is essential to individual development, yet many do not fully comprehend the existential weight of choice. When the Judge was younger, he too was unaware of the importance of decision, his choices informed by the “childish trust” of “the talk of my elders.” It was only later that he came to understand the weight of the moment of choice, when, “standing at the crossroads” his “soul was made ripe in the hour of decision” (E/O II, 157).

In *Either/Or*, two types of choice are discussed: esthetic and absolute. According to Judge William, esthetic choice is not really a choice at all, for it is completely “for the moment” (E/O II, 167) and in the next moment the individual can choose something completely different. Lacking any sort of connection to a larger “life project” or “task,” the esthetic choice amounts to nothing more than a whimsical expression of an individual’s particular preference or feeling at a point in time, a passive response to the satiation of his desire. Absolute choice on the other hand entails a deliberate and purposive choice. Initially, Judge William equates absolute choice with the choice between “good and evil,” but he soon deepens his notion of choice to a more generalized idea, equating absolute choice with the very decision to live the ethical life:

Rather than designating the choice between good and evil, my *Either/Or* designates the choice by which one chooses good and evil or rules them out. Here the question is under what qualifications one will view all existence and personally live ... Therefore, it is not so much a matter of choosing between willing good or willing evil as of choosing to will, but that in turn posits good and evil (E/O II, 169).

The primary ethical question for Kierkegaard is “How ought I to live?” As the Judge remarks here, ethics is not so much about choosing between good and evil as it is about *choosing to choose* to live ethically. Where esthetic choice has no real long-term aim or purpose, in absolute choice one is staking a life for oneself in the form of a long-term commitment beyond one’s immediate selfish desires. Such a commitment, as we will soon see, requires a higher level of subjective knowledge or “consciousness raised to the second power,” as well as a deep sense of personal responsibility. We can already begin to see how the Judge distances himself from Kantian moral thought, focusing on the general conditions of living the good life over locating a specific criterion.

The highest form of absolute choice for Judge William arises when one “chooses oneself.” To choose himself is not only fundamental to the individual’s ethical constitution, but to his identity as a whole.

The person who has ethically chosen and found himself possesses himself defined in his entire concretion. He then possesses himself as an individual who has these capacities, these passions, these inclinations, these habits, who is subject to these external influences, who is influenced in one direction thus and in another thus. Here he then possesses himself as a task in such a way that it is chiefly to order, shape, temper, inflame, control—in short, to produce an evenness in the soul, a harmony, which is the fruit of the personal virtues. Here the objective for his activity is himself, but nevertheless not arbitrarily determined, for he possesses himself as a task that has been assigned him, even though it became his by his own choosing (E/O II, 262).

Choosing oneself is synonymous with “finding himself” for the Judge, or, to use Socratic terminology, “knowing thyself.” The esthete has no conception of self, for his life is centered in the acquisition of some external object. The ethical life, on the other hand, demands a self-knowledge whereby the individual “possesses himself defined in his entire concretion.” Though many are quick to align the Judge’s teachings with Kantian moral theory, the Judge sounds more like Aristotle here than Kant.⁵⁶ In addition, the Judge’s notion of choice, which focuses on the ability of the individual to control and actualize himself, is clearly more person than action-centered.

A second point of interest here is that Judge William’s ethics acknowledges the complexities of subjective moral development, defining the moral agent as a nexus of forces and drives. On the one hand, the moral agent is “influenced by this specific social milieu, as this specific product of a specific environment...subject to the influence of

⁵⁶ The Judge’s description of the moral agent, describing the ethical individual in terms of “capacities,” “passions,” “inclinations,” and “habits” is distinctly Aristotelian.

various external influences ...” (E/O II, 251). On the other hand, the ethical subject is a “task for himself” who must “order, shape, temper, inflame, control” the soul. Although many are quick to accuse the Judge of advocating a radical freedom in the manner of Sartre, William’s self-choice is modest and reasonable, acknowledging the contingent nature of the ethical and its ability to inform the human person.

The central theme underlying the Judge’s idea of self-choice is *responsibility*. To live the ethical life is to understand oneself as an entity that can bring about qualitative changes to his own being. The esthete does not have this awareness, for he is only concerned with effecting change in the here and now. The esthete has no true responsibility, no true commitments. The individual who embraces the ethical, on the other hand, takes a deep responsibility for himself as a being that can bring about real qualitative change. This sense of responsibility is significant with regard to self-knowledge for it is through this awareness that the self emerges as a being apart from the world.

But as he becomes aware of all this, he takes upon himself responsibility for it all. He does not hesitate over whether he will take this particular thing or not, for he knows that if he does not do it something much more important will be lost. In the moment of choice, he is in complete isolation, for he withdraws from his social milieu, and yet at the same moment ‘he is in absolute continuity,’ for he chooses himself as a product (E/O II, 251).

Affirming the radical subjectivity of the ethical task, the Judge emphasizes the weight of the decision to “choose to choose”—a radical responsibility that defines the individual as a human person with a deep concern for himself apart from the world. The decision to choose oneself is existentially significant because it signifies a deep inwardness devoid of any objective frame of reference. Within the ethical existence-sphere, the individual is

estranged and isolated from the world, left only with himself to decide what sort of life he ought to live. For the person who has become ethically aware, to not choose is no longer a choice, “for he knows that if he does not do it something much more important will be lost.” Yet, this is precisely the value of the ethical for the Judge, for it is in those moments of self-choice that the individual comes to progress existentially and define herself as a moral agent. Choosing oneself for the Judge is taking this responsibility for oneself as a being that can change, and this, for William, is the true source of identity and self-knowledge for the authentic individual. Contra Kant and other ethical theorists, Judge William’s ethics call for a way of life rather than a life focused on any particular way of acting.

Of course, many would argue that the Judge’s ethics is too subjective. Taking a tone similar to Levinas, MacIntyre, in his seminal work, *After Virtue*, accuses Kierkegaard of presenting an idea that “destroys the whole tradition of a rational moral culture” (MacIntyre, 141). MacIntyre criticizes the notion of choice set forth in *Either/Or* for its groundlessness.

...the doctrine of *Enten-Eller* is plainly to the effect that the principles which depict the ethical way of life are to be adopted for no reason, but for a choice that lies beyond reasons, just because it is the choice of what is to count for us as a reason. Yet the ethical is to have authority over us. But how can that which we adopt for [no] reason have any authority over us? (MacIntyre, 42)

For MacIntyre, because the subject is the basis of all choice, i.e., because the individual “possesses himself as a task that has been assigned him... by his own choosing,” no objective reason can be provided for one ethical choice over another. Consequently, MacIntyre asserts that Choice as portrayed in *Either/Or* is utterly arbitrary. The Judge, however, insists that such a choice is not “arbitrarily determined.” One does wonder how

it is possible for such values to have any worth when determined exclusively by the subject. This conflict for MacIntyre reveals a “deep internal inconsistency” (MacIntyre, 43) between a very a high normative standard and complete arbitrariness.

How can this paradox be accounted for in Kierkegaard’s philosophy? From one perspective, we can read it as part of *Repetition*’s maieutic, employing paradox, in the manner of Socrates, as a philosophical methodology in order to “sting the reader’s soul” into self-awareness. Therefore, the inherent paradox of the Judge’s theory could be interpreted as a pedagogical exercise intended to stimulate the facilitation of ethical consciousness. While I agree that use of paradox is to some degree methodological, the paradox of the self is also a real constitutive ontological principle in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. As we recall, the individual himself, composed of two opposing, irreconcilable principles is himself paradoxical. In like manner, the moral agent is a paradoxical figure: on the one hand, he must choose; on the other hand, he is given no framework upon which to base such a decision. For Kierkegaard, it is standing at these crossroads where the value and weight of ethical existence lies, and it is precisely the idea “that we have no authority to appeal to” that supplies the ethical sphere with its value. Therefore, the paradox of the Judge’s theory seems to possess more than a pedagogical value.

The Judge’s final comments on the ethical in this second letter attempt to summarize his teachings, placing special emphasis on the relation between the identity of the individual and the ethical. The ethical, we are told, is “that whereby a person becomes what he becomes. It does not want to destroy the esthetic but to transfigure it. For a person to live ethically it is necessary that he become conscious of himself, so

thoroughly that no accidental element escapes him” (E/O II, 253). Individual existence (and identity in general) for Kierkegaard is inextricably related to one’s ethics. In the moment of resolute choice one must give careful concern to what one was, what one is, and what one is becoming. Authentic ethical choice for Kierkegaard requires choosing with one’s whole self,⁵⁷ requiring an assessment of one’s self as a temporal and historical whole. When one becomes aware that the individual is the foundation of the ethical, the individual begins to examine one’s choices as part of an “indelible ethical character,”⁵⁸ i.e., as a core moral agent. Following Aristotle’s approach to ethics as emphasizing the relationship between individual actions and the development of individual character, Kierkegaard believes in a core ethical existence that is the source of ethical action. For this reason, ethics cannot be a detached code of conduct that one impersonally applies to the world, nor can it be a stage of anthropological development that is to be overcome for some higher spiritual end. Quite the contrary, for Kierkegaard, ethical beliefs and choices are inseparable from the living, breathing individual and one could no sooner escape his or her ethical convictions than he or she could her own flesh: “The real subject is the ethically existing subject” (CUP, 301) and to live authentically requires an ethical consciousness obtained only through an active and purposeful participation in the ethical sphere.

Returning now to MacIntyre’s attacks, Kierkegaard is clearly aware of the meta-ethical and normative problems with his ethical subjectivism. However, the author of

⁵⁷ Also see “...through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy.” (E/O II, 163)

⁵⁸ “You see, this is, so to speak, the character *indelebilis* of the ethical, that the ethical, although it modestly places itself on the same level as the esthetic, nevertheless is essentially that which makes the choice a choice.” (E/O II, 168)

Either/Or II makes a clear distinction between utterly arbitrary choice as opposed to true, authentic choice. Choice for the esthete, we recall, is indeed arbitrary—whether one marries or not, or hangs himself or not is of no real difference either way. For the Judge, however, each individual choice is tethered to an individual ethical project with a preexisting history. Although the subject is indeed alone in the moment of ethical choice, in this same moment, “he is in absolute continuity, for he chooses himself as a product,” and it is here that the individual possesses dignity for the Judge.

A human being’s eternal dignity lies precisely in this, that he can gain a history. The divine in him lies in this, that he himself, if he so chooses, can give this history a continuity, because it gains that, not when it is the summary of what has taken place or has happened to me, but only when it is my personal deed in such a way, that even that which has happened to me, is transformed and transferred from necessity to freedom” (E/O II, 250).

Contra MacIntyre’s interpretation, ethical choice for the Judge does not take place in a vacuum. Each ethical choice emerges from a core ethical identity as a task that is always on the way towards actualization. In an instance of authentic choice, one chooses oneself in a manner that reflects the existence of a singular being who has concern for himself as an individual. Of course, one may argue that self-choice is nonetheless arbitrary.

However, I think this is precisely the point that Kierkegaard was trying to convey.

Within the ethical realm, there are no clear indicators as to how I ought to live or how I ought to act, yet this is the true value of the ethical for Kierkegaard—for it is in finding those convictions and beliefs that the individual comes to define himself as a being.

Contrary to traditional interpretations, the primary teaching of *Either/Or* is not to impose any particular ethical framework upon the reader. Instead, its purpose lies in illustrating the weight of the moral decision and the emergence of the self as it works to understand

itself as an ethical being. However, perhaps MacIntyre's greatest misinterpretation of the Judge lies in the fact that the Judge does give the individual a good reason to "choose to choose" the ethical life. The esthete's life is lacking in meaning and fulfillment because he lacks a point of reference that would make it meaningful, namely a self. Because the ethical life offers this advantage, the Judge clearly offers us a reason for choosing to choose, rather than not.

1.6 *Fear and Trembling* (Is Not About Ethics)

We have already discussed some general misconceptions of Kierkegaard's thought, in particular the idea that the ethical possesses a secondary status in his philosophy that is to be surpassed in favor of a higher plane of existence in the religious. The stages are not to be looked at as discrete categories that are ultimately overcome in some absolute *telos*. The stages, rather, are continuous manifestations of individual human development. Furthermore, the ethical in no way possesses an inferior or derivative value in Kierkegaard's framework. To the contrary, the ethical is foundational to existence, for the ethical is "that whereby a person becomes what he becomes" (E/O II, 253). What is more, the ethical for Kierkegaard is life lived to "the highest degree." The ethical life cannot be transcended, as such a task would require a complete transcendence of self, which is impossible for Kierkegaard. Yet, readers continue to treat *Fear and Trembling* as his definitive account of the ethical, where, it is said, that Kierkegaard emphasizes Abraham's suspension of the ethical in favor of God's will. From this perspective, the ethical is indeed secondary to the religious, for Abraham's greatness lies in his obedience to God over the social norms. But much is presupposed in this reading, namely: (1) that the ethical theory in *Fear and Trembling* is to be attributed to

Kierkegaard, and (2) that the key point in this text is Abraham's mere compliance to obey God's contemptible demand. I argue that a more discriminating reading discloses that *Fear and Trembling* is not a work on ethics per se, but an analysis of the complicated nature of religious faith, and more specifically, the individual trials undergone in the struggle to become religious. Though *Fear and Trembling* addresses ethics, it does so as a critique of a very particular ethical framework, namely that of the rationalist tradition. In what follows, I do not attempt to provide a full commentary or analysis of *Fear and Trembling*, for this would far exceed the boundaries of this dissertation. My only goal here is to show that *Fear and Trembling* is not a "positive" ethical work for Kierkegaard, and that, contrary to what many have said, it contributes little to his own ethical project.

a. The Ethical in *Fear and Trembling*

Many scholars of Kierkegaard question the value of *Fear and Trembling* as an ethical work, which "seems to hold up as exemplary and somehow worthy of imitation a kind of conduct that we cannot possibly encourage, defend, or understand in terms of general moral values" (Green, 263). On the one hand, Johannes depicts Abraham's willingness to murder Isaac as abominable. For de silentio, Abraham is clearly a murderer. On the other hand, Johannes praises Abraham as an exemplar of Christian faith. Ethically speaking the reader is left puzzled. How can one simultaneously condemn and praise an action that for many is clearly unethical? I suggest that a closer analysis of Kierkegaard's approach to the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* will help to clarify better the nature of this apparent contradiction.

In *Problema I*, which is framed under the hypothetical question “Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?”, Johannes puts forth a general definition of the ethical:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all time. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its *telos* but is itself the *telos* for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further (FT, 54).

On the surface, Johannes seems to presuppose a Kantian ethical framework where the ethical is understood as universalized principles applying to all rational creatures. Also known as “the formula of universal law,” Kant’s categorical imperative, we may recall, argues that one should “always act in such a way that the maxim of your actions can be willed as a universal law” (Kant, 14). Likewise, Johannes remarks that the individual has his *telos* in the “universal” and “it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become universal” (FT, 54). A second Kantian theme here emphasizes an ethical teleology having its sole purpose “in itself.” Theories such as Utilitarianism or Divine Command place the value of the good in something external to the ethical (utility and Divine Will respectively); what is good for Kant is so in virtue of itself. Similarly, Johannes here emphasizes the all-encompassing nature of the ethical, “which has nothing outside itself that is its *telos*.”

However, although many attribute Johannes’ treatment of the ethical in *Fear and Trembling* exclusively to Kant,⁵⁹ this is a hasty assumption. Generally speaking, Kierkegaard’s primary philosophical opponent is Hegel, and though his depiction of the ethical indeed possesses a certain Kantian sensibility, it is Hegel’s name that is directly

⁵⁹ See for instance Elmer H. Duncan (1963), Green (1993), Outka (1982), and Russell (1975).

addressed here.⁶⁰ However, before we can address these Hegelian elements in *Fear and Trembling*, we must first delineate Hegel's understanding of the ethical as universal, and more specifically his distinction between *Moralität* (individual morality) and *Sittlichkeit* ('ethical life').

Kant and Hegel both associate the ethical with the rational, yet they disagree with regard to their understanding of "rationality." The ethical is indeed the universal for Kant, but Hegel takes Kant's notion of the universal to be grounded in the rational thought of the individual. Because each individual is an autonomous rational agent, i.e., an end in itself, Kant is able to link up the universal principles of thought to individual rationality. But for Hegel the individual self cannot be regarded as the primary ethical principle. *Moralität*, or an "individual agent's inner will and intention" (Lippitt, 86), is indeed a component of ethics. However, ultimately one must subordinate his individual will to that of the universal will, i.e., to social or customary morality or *Sittlichkeit*. The term that Johannes employs in the first *problema*, '*det Saedelige*' is a direct translation of '*das Sittlichkeit*,' ('ethical life')—a clear reference to Part III of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1820) which bears the same name.⁶¹ Where Kant grounds the principles of rationality in the autonomous individual, for Hegel, rationality is manifest externally through the institutional customs and norms of society that embody the dialectical progression of reason.⁶² Simply stated, the ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) for Hegel is understood as "the various customs, laws and institutions of a particular society" (Lippitt, 85). Hegel makes a distinction between the particular (the individual) and the universal

⁶⁰ Some have read Kierkegaard as addressing the rationalist tradition in general. Although I find this interpretation adequate to some degree, Kierkegaard's direct reference to Hegel and Hegelian philosophy throughout, along with his lifelong polemic against Hegel, seems to suggest otherwise.

⁶¹ See FT 152, note 54.

⁶² Hegel 1967, sec. 352.

which is not present in Kant, and it is through the dialectical movement between these two components, i.e., in the subordination of the self to the universal or *Sittlichkeit*, that one achieves self-actualization.

Within the Hegelian framework, Abraham's actions are immoral on the basis of a faulty relation to the universal. Abraham's willingness to murder Isaac clearly subordinates his social obligations (namely duty to family) to his individual will, and not the reverse as is demanded by the Hegelian framework:

If this is the case, then Hegel is right in 'The Good Conscience,' where he qualifies man only as the individual and considers this qualification as a 'moral form of evil.' (see especially the Philosophy of Right), which must be annulled in the teleology of the moral in such a way that the single individual who remains in that stage either sins or is immersed in spiritual trial. But Hegel is wrong in speaking about faith; he is wrong in not protesting loudly and clearly against Abraham's enjoying honor and glory as a father of faith when he ought to be sent back to a lower court and shown up as a murderer (FT, 55).

The individual has his natural *telos* in the Universal for Hegel, and the individual who "asserts himself in his singularity before the universal... sins" (FT, 54). For these reasons, Johannes attacks Hegel for not outwardly condemning Abraham's actions. But note the hypothetical structure of above passage. Johannes is by no means presupposing that the Hegelian framework is correct. For Johannes, *if* Hegel is right, *then* Abraham is wrong. But, is Hegel right? For Abraham, the theory clearly has its limitations. Hegel's philosophy cannot account for the paradox of faith associated with Abraham's spiritual trial, namely "that the single individual is higher than the universal" (FT, 55). From this reading, some have argued that *Fear and Trembling* functions as a criticism of overly systematized accounts of the human condition, which attempt to assimilate the complexities of existence into universalized ethical categories. For Kierkegaard, the

essential aspects of ethical development—namely the individual struggle and strife associated with becoming ethical—are trivialized through assimilation into the dialectic of reason: “Abraham’s ethical individualism then becomes a noble protest against the Hegelian apotheosis of the nation state or, alternatively, a prophetic defense of the individual in a world increasingly dominated by herd morality” (Green, 194). In this interpretation, *Fear and Trembling* reads primarily as a critical analysis of a particular ethical system, i.e., as a “negative” ethical account: Kierkegaard—through Johannes—proffers the un-universalizable Hegelian demand of individual subordination to the universal *Sittlichkeit*. If this is the case, the notion of “the ethical” put forth in *Fear and Trembling* is to be attributed neither to Johannes nor Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard is not here presenting a standard for ethics. He is, rather, demonstrating the untenable exaltation of the Hegelian universal over the self in ethics.

Nonetheless, many contend that *Fear and Trembling* contains Kierkegaard’s most personal ethical convictions, in particular the idea that the ethical has its ultimate justification in God alone. For most, the work’s central theme emphasizes Abraham’s loyalty and obedience to God. From this reading, *Fear and Trembling* presents (or perhaps even advocates) some form of Divine Command theory. This is quite a different ethical approach to the ethic depicted by Johannes, which “rests immanently in itself” (FT, 83). Johannes presumes the Kantian idea that the ethical has its sole purpose and value in itself, meaning that everything is of subordinate importance to ethical. Divine Command ethical theory, on the other hand, has its *telos* outside itself, namely, in the will or command of God: “When God commands one to murder his son, the immorality of the immoral is suspended for the duration of this situation. What is more, that which is

otherwise purely evil is for the duration of this situation purely good because it has become pleasing to God” (Buber, 115). Support for this interpretation can be found in Johannes’ remark that “duty is simply the expression of God’s will” (FT, 60) as well as various comments in Kierkegaard’s journals and papers indicating an interest to the Divine Command position.⁶³ The popularity of this reading lies in its ability to alleviate the inherent contradiction and tension in the text, which explains “how Abraham can act without immediate regard for ethics and purely in obedience to God’s command while still meriting our highest ethical respect: both for his obedience and for the strength and integrity of his faith” (Green, 197). But I would question any interpretation that aims at resolving the core tension in the text, for, like Socrates, Kierkegaard embraces the value of paradox, contradiction, and irony. Abraham’s conduct is “for all eternity, a paradox, impervious to thought” (FT, 56). Johannes wants a reading of the Genesis story that does not oversimplify Abraham’s trial, leaving out the “anguish,” “fear and distress in which the great are tried” (FT, 93). But beyond this, resolving the conflict through a Divine Command explanation in no way resolves all philosophical problems associated with the Abraham story, for this reading only creates an entirely new set of problems of graver existential and ethical significance.

If one reads Kierkegaard as an advocate of Divine Command, one must account for a very frightful and forbidding ethical theory in which all actions commanded by God, including genocide, are morally permissible. Such a reading is the primary target for critics of Kierkegaard’s ethics, who often point to the tenuous nature of an ethical theory grounded in God’s whimsy. Within the Divine Command framework, murdering

⁶³ see 968-76, X(2) A 396 n.d., 1850; 1967-78, vol. 1, entry 188.

an innocent person is not inherently wrong; the reason that I should refrain, or not refrain, from killing an innocent person is dependent upon God's Will.

Others see Kierkegaard as pointing to the arbitrary nature of the ethical, in essence, advocating a moral nihilism. If either of these criticisms is correct, the value of Kierkegaard's ethics must be called into question. However, I argue that there is little evidence suggesting that Johannes (or Kierkegaard) condones Divine Command theory in *Fear and Trembling*.

To begin, although *Fear and Trembling* is interpreted as an apology for Divine Command theory, the work contains no account of a religious moral theory. If the purpose of *Fear and Trembling* is to argue for the Divine Command position, it would seem obvious for Johannes to contrast the ethical position that Abraham suspends (Sittlichkeit or social morality) with a separate religious ethics to which Abraham ultimately conforms (Green, 168). However, such an ethic appears nowhere in the text. One may assume that an ethic grounded in God's trustworthiness is implied, yet "God's righteousness is never praised" (Green, 197). It is unclear if God is good or bad, and most would argue that both God and Abraham exist appallingly *beyond* good and evil. Nowhere is an ethical framework presented that is capable of making sense of Abraham's trial. In short, *Fear and Trembling* seems to have little to say concerning the ethical nature of Abraham's trial, and many find this sufficient evidence for disregarding ethical interpretations of the work.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ See in particular Green's "Enough is Enough! Fear and Trembling is not About Ethics" (1993).

Second, the Divine Command reading of *Fear and Trembling* depends on one key assertion—that *Abraham's greatness lies in his obedience to God's command*. For most, the essential point of *Fear and Trembling* is to praise Abraham's conduct for his unwavering faithfulness to God. However, this reading is inconsistent with how the true knight of faith is portrayed. In the opening "Attunement" or "Exordium" (FT, 9-14) Johannes provides a very thorough account of the Abraham story, complete with four different interpretations of the narrative. The purpose of this presentation is to show four Abrahams "whom Johannes considers not to be worthy of the title 'knight of faith,' each an Abraham who is not the Abraham" (Lippitt, 22). By comparing the "sub-Abrahams" to "the" Abraham, the reader is given a better understanding of the Patriarch's greatness. The nuances in the "sub-Abrahams" reflect different perspectives of the trial—where the first accounts for both Abraham and Isaac's perspectives, it is Sarah and Abraham who are given treatment in the second account, and Isaac alone in the fourth. However, for our purposes what is most revealing are two essential qualities shared by all four Abrahams. First, each sub-Abraham is unequivocally willing to carry out the sacrifice; second, none of them for Johannes is a "as 'great' as 'the' Abraham" (Lippitt, 22). Together, these two points weaken the Divine Command reading of *Fear and Trembling*, which is dependent upon the idea that Abraham's greatness is selfsame with his obedience. If Abraham's greatness lies in his willingness to carry out the sacrifice, then, as Lippitt asserts, there would be no reason why each and every one of the sub-Abraham's could not be lauded as the 'father of faith.' All are prepared to obey God and sacrifice Isaac. The fact that Johannes clearly considers them all to be inferior to 'the' Abraham shows that mere willingness to obey the will of God no matter how outrageous

the ostensible demand cannot be what is being commended” (Lippitt, 28-29).

Furthermore, the idea of obedience seems to have little ethical value in the work as a whole, for even the “tragic hero,” which is in many ways the categorical antithesis of the “knight of faith,” displays obedience.⁶⁵ Therefore, since Abraham’s greatness does not appear to be in his obedience to God, it seems unlikely that one could read *Fear and Trembling* as condoning a Divine Command theory.

Two points can be concluded from the above analysis: (1) the only “ethical” framework directly alluded to in *Fear and Trembling* is that of Hegelian social morality, of which the work functions as a criticism, and (2) ethically speaking, Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son is of minor significance to Johannes, discounting the plausibility of a Divine Command interpretation. But, does this exhaust all ethical elements of this work? In his *Gift of Death* (1995), Derrida provides an insightful ethical rendering of the text, arguing that “the sacrifice of Isaac illustrates the most common and everyday experience of responsibility” (Derrida, 67). For Derrida, the essential theme of *Fear and Trembling* is not God’s particular command upon Abraham, but ethical responsibility in general. His main claim is that, although “duty or responsibility binds me to the other,” it is impossible to fulfill duties and responsibilities to everyone: “I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others” (Derrida, 68). For Derrida, fulfilling any particular ethical obligation entails favoring one moral obligation over another—a *favoritism that cannot be justified*. For example, if I decide to give my change to a

⁶⁵ All three of the tragic heroes that Johannes discusses, Agamemnon, Jephthah, and Brutus face trials where they are commanded to sacrifice loved ones for a higher cause. However, in each case, the higher cause is society.

homeless person on the street, how can I justify giving to this particular person over any other homeless person? In choosing to fulfill a particular moral obligation, I select one moral obligation over a multiplicity of others: “As soon as I enter into a relation with the other ... I know that I can only respond by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all others” (Derrida, 68). For Derrida, Moriah is “our habitat every second of every day,” in the sense that every time I give money to a particular individual, I effectively ‘sacrifice’ all the other, equally deserving people (Derrida, 69). Giving to one homeless person over another cannot be justified: “How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention other people?” (Derrida, 71) From this interpretation, *Fear and Trembling* aims to illuminate the complexity of the moral realm and the existential weight of ethical responsibility, where each choice entails a “sacrifice” of all others, of the universal claim.

Though one of the more insightful readings of *Fear and Trembling*, Derrida’s is subject to a well-known criticism—why must Kierkegaard employ the Abraham story to convey a universal point? Abraham’s experience is *not* the everyday experience. Abraham suffers alone in silence, his trial inexplicable to anyone but himself. Johannes repeatedly remarks on the uniqueness of Abraham’s trial, arguing “I doubt very much whether one will find in the whole world a single analogy, except a later one that proves nothing” (FT, 85). Johannes admittedly struggles to understand Abraham’s actions, and to reduce Abraham’s trial to the everyday seems to obliterate the force of a truly compelling story about a man and his faith.

Have we at this point exhausted all potential ethical interpretations of *Fear and Trembling*? From what has been said, it seems that the work has little to offer with regard to Kierkegaard's ethical project. The recurring theme here is "faith," and in particular, the faith of a very unique individual undergoing a tumultuous spiritual trial. In the *Postscript*, Kierkegaard remarks that *Fear and Trembling* is something of a "noble lie" directed outward in the "deceptive form" of a "scream" when its real focus lies "in the abyss of inwardness" (CUP, 261). Readings that focus on an ethical analysis of conduct all compromise Abraham's individuality and the sheer solitude of his struggle in coming to terms with "the paradox of faith." Johannes himself admits that "I cannot understand Abraham... I can only admire him" (FT, 112). Johannes admittedly "stands outside faith" and one is left to wonder to what degree Johannes is reliable in his assessment of the Genesis story.

Finally, *Fear and Trembling* by no means represents Kierkegaard's definitive account of the relation between the ethical and the religious. Later works such as *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), *Works of Love* (1847), *Purity of the Heart* (1847), and *Sickness Unto Death* (1849) offer a completely different analysis of the relation between ethics and religion—one that is far more philosophically substantial than any account gleaned from the pages of *Fear and Trembling*.

1.7 Conclusions: Gaining Oneself

From the analysis of Kierkegaard's ethical project throughout his 1843 authorship up to the publication of *Fear and Trembling*, the following conclusions can be drawn: First, contrary to traditional interpretations, the ethical is not a stage to be overcome for some higher obligation. To the contrary, the ethical existence sphere is a worldview that

reflects the primary mode of authentic subjectivity that is both existentially and ethically significant. Kierkegaard devoted his entire authorship to understanding the nature of the individual, and without the ethical there can be no individual in his philosophy. The ethical is the most important type of existence for Kierkegaard, for it is only when one enters into the ethical through “choosing to choose” the ethical life that he first understands himself as an individual apart from the world. This subjective inwardness is the foundation of Kierkegaard’s philosophy of self and ethics and provides the foundation for the ongoing transcendence of subject that is the basis of his existential dialect. The primary philosophical problem for Kierkegaard is accounting for the becoming of the human person without stifling the dynamic nature of the qualitative leaps of soul essential to existence. Kierkegaard’s ethics is a philosophy of becoming that firmly embraces the idea of the self as a being that becomes through choosing himself. The self that chooses (and receives) itself is the substantial core of his ethical theory and the vantage point from which the authentic individual experiences and understands the world. The self for Kierkegaard is not based in a singular soul, but instead in the dialectical process of subjective becoming. This ethical sphere cannot be transcended or surpassed, but only intensified as the individual emerges through deeper levels of inwardness and concern—and it is this idea that critics and commentators alike have overlooked in Kierkegaard’s ethical theory. In response to the claim that Kierkegaard’s ethics is overly subjective, his philosophy is unquestionably grounded in individual existence. For him, the value of the ethical sphere is based in the fact that the individual is left alone to choose what sort of life to live. That said, the choices one makes in the ethical sphere are not, as MacIntyre argues, arbitrary, for the Judge (and Kierkegaard) give us a clear reason to choose

oneself—the possibility of gaining oneself. Finally, contra Levinas, Kierkegaard’s ethical theory does not disregard the value and importance of ‘the other’ in favor of the individual. Although the purpose of his ethics focuses on the becoming of the individual human person, the paradigm for human flourishing is within the context of a committed, loving relationship. The model that Kierkegaard believes best embodies ethical existence is marriage, which, when developed within the context of marital love, reflects an esthetic-ethical worldview where both individuals flourish through an inter-subjective relationship based in an understanding of one another as a being who becomes in time. Although marriage is by no means a requirement for the subjective inwardness that Kierkegaard associates with authentic existence, a relationship grounded in marital love draws out virtues within the individual that lead to the strengthening of the soul.

Of course, *Either/Or* is by no means Kierkegaard’s final word on his conception of the ethical. *Either/Or* reflects the first of many philosophical experiments that seeks to work out his ethical philosophy and the conditions for an authentic ethical subjectivity. The true sequel to *Either/Or* is not *Fear and Trembling*, but *Repetition*—the work where Kierkegaard fine-tunes and further experiments with his ideas of choosing (and gaining) oneself within the framework of his unique understanding of ethical subjectivity. Let us now turn to this work.

Chapter 2

Kierkegaard's Ethics of Repetition

"I like boring things. I like things to be exactly the same over and over again."
Andy Warhol⁶⁶

2.1 Repetitions

In recent years, a good bit of scholarship has been devoted to Kierkegaard's *Repetition* (1843), the "darling of deconstruction" (Garff, 232). Yet, *Repetition* remains one of Kierkegaard's most neglected works in contrast with its "companion" piece, *Fear and Trembling*, published on the same day in 1843. While I agree that *Fear and Trembling* plays an essential role in Kierkegaard's philosophy, contrary to conventional readings I have argued that this work contributes little to his ethical theory. The true sequel to Kierkegaard's great ethical work, *Either/Or II*, is not *Fear and Trembling*, but the lesser known *Repetition*. In what follows, I provide an exposition of and commentary on *Repetition* with the aim of delineating Kierkegaard's rich ethical project.

There are many repetitions in *Repetition* and Kierkegaard plays on the notion and phenomenon of "repetition" and "repeating" throughout the novella. The main repetition is presented to the reader in the form of two stories in which is revealed in a story within a story. On the one hand, we have the "Report by Constantin Constantius" (the repetitive nature of his name a repetition itself)—and his wrangling with the philosophical problem of movement. Constantin attempts to construct a new philosophy of movement, a

⁶⁶ Posthumously attributed to Warhol by Nicholas Love at a Memorial Mass for Andy Warhol at St. Patrick's Cathedral, on April 1, 1987.

philosophy of “repetition.” His philosophical theory is tested in Berlin, where he attempts, and fails, at experiencing a true repetition. Within this story we have the narrative of the Young Man, Constantin’s recently engaged coffee shop confidant, who frequently visits Constantin in search of advice and comfort over his transition into the marital life. At the end of the first part of *Repetition*, the Young Man disappears, and by the end of part two we learn that he is merely a fictional creation of Constantin’s. The reader of *Repetition* is confronted with three characters who are reflections of one another: Kierkegaard, Constantin and the Young Man. Yet, the close reader of *Repetition* comes to realize this repetition is no simple reduplication of characters, but is instead a reduplication of a single soul in the midst of real qualitative change through and in temporality.

The other major repetition in *Repetition* is structural. As stated in the introduction to this dissertation, *Repetition*’s unwieldy style and structure is difficult to navigate. However, the astute reader will no doubt notice that the work is itself built upon a series of repetitions. Although *Repetition* can be broken into two parts,⁶⁷ the real structure of the work is organized around the two major components of the text: (1) the two monologues on his philosophy of repetition, and (2) the two narratives of the work mentioned above—both of which are, individually, repetitions in their own right. As we will soon see, both the monologues and the narratives repeat the same ideas but in different ways, and, as Constantin oscillates between both parts, Kierkegaard’s philosophy of repetition is disclosed. We begin with the first narrative of *Repetition*,

⁶⁷ In the Hong translation of *Repetition*, the editor divides the text into “Part One” and “Part Two,” although these titles are written in brackets to reflect the fact that these demarcations were not Kierkegaard’s. Where Kierkegaard did not designate a title for part one, part two is simply called “Repetition.”

where we are introduced to our author and the basic ideas of this experimental philosophy.

2.2 First Monologue: The Case for Repetition

Constantin Constantius is no philosophical slouch. The first two sentences of his report penetrate the oldest and deepest of philosophical questions, namely that of change, movement, and temporality.

When the Eleatics denied motion, Diogenes, as everyone knows, came forward as an opponent. He literally did come forward, because he did not say a word but merely paced back and forth a few times, thereby assuming that he had sufficiently refuted them (R, 131).

That Constantin should begin with this particular philosophical problem is of no minor importance. Philosophy is said to have its origins in the “Pre-Socratics,” and the Eleatics represent the most influential of these thinkers. The Eleatics were primarily concerned with the problem of motion and change, and its founder, Parmenides (500 BCE), weighed in heavily on this question. In his poem, Parmenides argues against the possibility of change—a position upon which Plato builds his entire philosophy. For these philosophers that which is fully real is unchanging. However, as Constantius reports here, Diogenes opposed the Eleatics, famously “refuting” the Eleatic worldview by empirically demonstrating how at least one being, the human being, does indeed change. Change for Diogenes, as well as Kierkegaard, is not an illusion, but a real phenomenon that the subject endures—a philosophical worldview that is inconsistent with the essentialist account that, from the time of the Eleatics, has dominated the history of Western philosophy.

The question of change for Constantin is just as relevant for the moderns as it was for the ancients, “for repetition is a crucial expression for what ‘recollection’ was to the Greeks... Just as they taught that all knowing is recollection, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition” (R, 131). Constantin’s catchword for change in the modern world is “repetition.” Rather than defining “repetition”, our author contrasts “repetition” with Platonic “recollection”: “Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward” (R, 131). In classifying “repetition” and “recollection” as the same movement, one is led to believe that repetition is an epistemic theory. Plato’s theory of recollection is a view of learning that posits truth as something obtained through “recollecting” the eternal truths of reality—the Forms. However, true repetition for Constantin is a forward, and not a backward, recollection. To recollect is to become aware of something that has already existed. To repeat something implies re-experiencing or re-presenting something that has already been, *but in a new or different way*. From this perspective, recollection and repetition represent not only two different ways of acquiring truth, but two different conceptions of truth altogether: for Plato, truth is something that is absolute and unchanging; for Constantin, truth is something that is always in the process of becoming.

In addition to its Platonic references, “recollection” for Kierkegaard also designates reference the esthetic existence sphere, and in particular to esthetic despair. The esthetic sphere, we recall, is not merely limited to immediate pleasures of the body, but also to the pleasures associated with philosophical reflection. In *Either/Or I*, Kierkegaard associates high-level esthetes as lovers of recollection, and ‘A’, we recall,

proposes the necessity of developing the art of “recollecting and forgetting” as a means to flourishing in the esthetic existence sphere (E/O II, 293-295). The esthete who is to survive in the esthetic without perishing like Don Juan must acquire recollection’s poetic power in a manner idealizes the esthetic in quasi-perpetuity.⁶⁸ Yet recollection is not only important for esthetes, for the Judge also praises recollection in his understanding of ethical existence, remarking that “it is an art to recollect” and that “that ability to recollect is the condition of all productivity.”⁶⁹ Kierkegaard was critical of recollection as an esthetic conception because he believed that it reduced and devalued the human person into some pre-existing universal idea to which individuality must be sacrificed. However, as we will soon see, Kierkegaard is not against all types of recollection, for he acknowledges the importance of recollection with regard to self-awareness and, in particular, to understanding one’s historicity. What Kierkegaard rejects is a conception of recollection where the individual is relegated to the past. True recollection for Kierkegaard must remain aware of its past while simultaneously looking forward.

In addition to Platonic Recollection, Constantin contrasts repetition with Hegelian mediation, remarking that, “Mediation” is a foreign word: ‘repetition’ is a good Danish word, and I congratulate the Danish language on a philosophical term” (R, 149).

Kierkegaard argues that Hegel’s dialectic fails to account for change, questioning the manner in which the Hegelian Dialectic comes about, “whether it results from the motion of” synthesis and antithesis, “and in what sense” the change and movement “is already

⁶⁸ In *Stages on Life’s Way*, ‘A’ remarks: “Although the difference between memory and recollection is great, they are frequently confused. In the human life, this confusion lends itself to studying the depth of the individual. That is, recollection is ideality, but as such it is strenuous and conscientious in a way completely different from indiscriminate memory. Recollection wants to maintain for a person the eternal continuity in life and assure him that this earthly existence remains *uno tenore* [uninterrupted], one breath, and expressible in one breath” (SLW, 10).

⁶⁹ For a concise exposition of the Judge’s notion of recollection in comparison to the esthetic recollection, see Mackey, 1971, pgs. 14-19.

contained in them.” Is “something new” “added in the process, and, if so, how?” (R, 149). With the exception of Aristotle, Constantin believes that Hegel, along with the history of philosophy, has failed to answer the essential question of movement, namely, what is it that underlies and undergoes change?

The primary philosophical question here is not so much whether change or movement is “possible ... [but] whether something gains or loses in being repeated” (R, 131), and that which gains or loses for Constantin is the human person. But how is it possible for something to stay the same while changing? What is the basis of the continuity that we experience in the face of everyday flux? Also, what brings about the change? Does it arise innately or does it come about through outside causal forces (or both)? For the ancients, in particular the Eleatics and Plato, these questions can be answered through hypothesizing a world apart from the perpetual flux of existence, one that is unchanging and permanent. Things are permanent because things have essences. Of course this philosophical view did not die with antiquity, but has emerged in the form of some type of essentialism throughout the history of philosophy through philosophers like Augustine, Aquinas, Spinoza, Descartes, and Hegel. However, in contrast to this philosophical worldview are philosophers like Diogenes, Heraclitus, Aristotle, and Kierkegaard—free thinkers with a more modest account of truth who understand that change and time are not only real, but *true*. For someone like Plato, if everything is always moving and changing, nothing can be known. But for someone like Kierkegaard and the raft of anti-essentialist philosophers that oppose the essentialist tradition, *the only reason we can know anything at all is because things become*.

Constantin's primary criticism of Plato and the essentialist tradition is the fact that it looks "backward" and not "forward," and on the surface *Repetition* appears to be an epistemological critique: the essentialist worldview evades the real philosophical questions that arise in the face of the reality of "change" and "becoming" by merely denying its reality. Yet the reader of *Repetition* soon realizes that Kierkegaard's major concern and critique of essentialism is existential.

It is quite true what philosophy says, that life must be understood backwards. But then one soon forgets, that it all must be lived forward. Which principle, the more one thinks it through, ends exactly with temporal life never being able to be properly understood, precisely because I can at no instant find complete rest to adopt the position: backward (JN, 179).

In reducing reality to an absolute and a-temporal truth, Constantin argues that, like the truth they seek, the essentialist also conceives existence as something stagnant and unchanging. For the essentialist, everything that is, has already been, including human existence. Yet, for Kierkegaard, truth lies in subjectivity, which for him is a being in a state of perpetual flux. The self for Kierkegaard is a temporal unfolding on a trajectory launching out of its past towards the future via the present. For the essentialist, this aspect of existence is not only subordinate to a higher truth (in Plato's case the Forms), but lacking in reality and truth altogether. Kierkegaard does not deny the philosophical importance of the past, for he rightly acknowledges that life must be *understood* backwards. However, to look at life exclusively in terms of what has been is to ignore the larger temporal framework that is the foundation of subjective becoming.

Because the essentialist ignores this larger framework and truth, Kierkegaard suggests that having such a worldview will result in "unhappiness." For him, there is nothing new to discover for the essentialist, i.e., no new paths to forge in life. To the

essentialist, the world is certain and clear—a world of which one easily tires. In response to this, Kierkegaard offers us his philosophy of repetition, which teaches one to approach and love existence like “a beloved wife whom one never wearies.”

Repetition’s love is in truth the only happy love. Like recollection, it is not disturbed by hope nor by the marvelous anxiety of discovery, neither, however, does it have the sorrow of recollection. It has instead the blissful security of the moment. Hope is new attire, stiff and starched and splendid. Still, since it has not yet been tried on, one does not know whether it will suit one, or whether it will fit. Recollection is discarded clothing which, however lovely it might be, no longer suits one because one has outgrown it. Repetition is clothing that never becomes worn, that fits snugly and comfortably, that neither pulls nor hangs too loosely (R, 131-132).

Kierkegaard associates repetition with a “happy love” of life that is marked by a contentedness with, and acceptance of, the flux of reality, and contradistinguishes repetition with the philosophies of recollection (Plato) and hope (Hegel)—philosophical worldviews that, Constantin will argue throughout *Repetition*, oversimplify (or altogether ignore) the importance of time and change with regard to the identity and reality of the human subject. The existential consequence of essentialism, he argues, is a philosophical worldview that the subject can never feel at home in, because the subject does not look for meaning and value in his current existence, but instead within the worldview of either what has been (Plato) or what is to come (Hegel). Consequently, neither philosophy can find “security” in the moment. Kierkegaard depicts both worldviews as inconsistent with the reality of existential becoming, and he associates the unhappiness of essentialism with the clash between, the desire for unchanging truth on the hand, and an identity marked by flux on the other. The resulting despair, though not fatal, has taken the flesh and blood from philosophical accounts of existence and Kierkegaard proposes his philosophy of repetition as a means to restore it. What he suggests is a change in worldviews—a

philosophy that can account for the subject without compromising the importance and reality of the qualitative changes of the soul that are the basis of subjective becoming.

Of course, Constantin's restricting of Platonic recollection to nostalgic unhappiness seems dubious. I want to suggest, however, that our author's attack, while glib, ought not interfere with his overall message. Constantius' attack against recollection is not an attack against Platonic philosophy per se,⁷⁰ but an attack against a philosophical worldview that posits truth—and, in particular, self-knowledge—as something absolute and pre-determined. In comparing Plato's conception of truth to a garment that one has outgrown, Constantin is calling for a new approach to subjective understanding that does not approach the individual as something that is stagnant and static, but instead leaves room for existential growth and flourishing. Subjective truth, for Constantin (as well as Kierkegaard), is never absolute and final, but is always on the way. In aligning himself with Diogenes against the Eleatics, Constantin is calling for a new conception of truth and, more specifically, a new sort of *subjective* truth.

Having filled out Constantin's opening philosophical remarks, let us now turn to the first major narrative in the story, the story of the Young Man, where Kierkegaard first tests his philosophy of repetition through a real-life experiment.

2.3 Experiment One – The Story of the Young Man

In the first narrative of the story, Constantin documents his relationship with an individual known simply as the Young Man, a person our author became acquainted with “through casual coffee-shop associations,” whose “handsome appearance” and “soulful

⁷⁰ Kierkegaard did embrace certain aspects of Plato's philosophy, in particular, his notion of love, art, music and religion. See *Journals and Papers*, 178.

expression” had a “most alluring effect” upon him. Constantin describes the Young Man as having a “deeper and more complex nature,” as well as being “at the captivating age in which spiritual maturity, just like physical maturity at a far earlier age, announces itself by a frequent breaking of the voice” (R, 133). The Young Man, who is recently engaged, pays Constantin a visit and asks our author to accompany him for a carriage ride. While waiting for the carriage to arrive, the Young Man exudes deep melancholic passion that wavers between joy and madness. Pacing back and forth before Constantin, our love-struck youth, in an “abnormal mental state” repeats over again and over again a verse from Paul Møller’s “Aged Lover”:

Then, to my easy chair,
Comes a dream from my youth,
To my easy chair.
A heartfelt longing comes over me for you,
Thou sun of women (R, 136).

Nameless⁷¹ is “deeply and fervently and beautifully and humbly in love” (R, 134), and Constantin seems to enjoy playing the role of observer in this relationship. Yet, it is not long before our author comes to understand the true nature of Nameless’ melancholia—he “was already able to recollect his love... He was essentially through with the relationship” (R, 136). Swept up in the passion and infatuation of the initial stage of his love affair, the Young man is already looking back upon these days as an old man might, “standing at the end instead of the beginning of the relationship... but such a mistake is and remains a person’s downfall” (R, 137). The Young Man is an esthete,⁷² and he

⁷¹ In addition to “the Young Man,” Kierkegaard also uses “Nameless”—a moniker denoting the Young Man’s lack of identity: “My pain and my suffering are nameless, even as I myself am nameless” (R, 203).

⁷² Many commentators speculate that the Young Man in *Repetition* is the same person as ‘A’—the author of *Either/Or I*.

approaches love as an esthete would. In *Either/Or II*, Judge William compares the virtues of romantic (or erotic) love to those of marital love, ultimately concluding that, although erotic love “lends itself much better to artistic portrayal than marital love,” erotic love “cannot be stretched out in time” (E/O II, 139), cannot be held onto. In short, erotic love lacks substance beyond those initial feelings, which, however fleeting, are the supreme object of the esthete’s desire. An esthete is not interested in the commitment and responsibility associated with marital love. Subsequently, he will do his best to cling to those early moments, which will only find expression in recollection.⁷³ For this reason, Constantin (and Judge William) believe that erotic love can only end in unhappiness and despair.

For the next two weeks, the Young Man would occasionally visit, during which Constantin noticed a remarkable change within him: “A poetic creativity awakened in him on a scale I had never believed possible.” However, this was the problem, for “...[t]he young girl was not his beloved: she was the occasion that awakened the poetic in him and made him a poet” (R, 138). Nameless does not view the young woman as an object of enduring love. He instead sees her as his muse, stuck in the nostalgia of a love no longer existing. We learn that the Young Man’s condition worsens with time and, because Constantin realizes that the relationship is utterly futile for both parties, he suggests breaking off the relationship, but to do so in a way that will cause the least amount of distress to the young girl:

Burn all your bridges. Transform yourself into a contemptible person whose only delight is to trick and deceive. Try, if possible to be somewhat unpleasing to her... Be inconstant, nonsensical; do one thing one day and

⁷³ This section of *Repetition* appears to delve deeper into the essay in *Either/Or I* “The Unhappiest One” (pgs. 217-230) which argues that the source of unhappiness is an inability to appreciate the present.

another the next, but without passion, in an utterly careless way... In place of all love's delight, show a certain cloying quasi love that is neither indifference or desire; let your conduct be just as unpleasant as it is to watch a person drool (R, 142).

Our author's suggestion to the Young Man is to become such "a contemptible person" that the young woman would no longer want to be with him, which would place less of a burden on her during the breakup.⁷⁴ Although the Young Man originally consented to Constantin's plan, in the end, he did not go through with it and Nameless suddenly disappears altogether.

On the surface, the first narrative seems to depict the wrong sort of repetition, i.e., recollection, and its resulting unhappy love.

But here I sit going on at great length about what was mentioned just to show that in fact recollection's love makes a man unhappy. My young friend did not understand repetition; he did not believe and did not powerfully will it (R, 145).

Because the Young Man is primarily concerned with the early erotic stages of the relationship, mostly for its ability to incite his poetic creativity, his love will never flourish. The single advantage of esthetic or romantic love is that it poses no risk—"it begins with the loss; the reason it is safe and secure is that it has nothing to lose" (R, 136)—which is why the Young Man, as an esthete, is more inclined to remain adrift in the comfortable nostalgia of first love and recollection than to progress to the deeper form of love required for marriage. Yet, the true source of his conflict and suffering appears to be the fact that he is faced with the possibility of entering the ethical stage by a mature and responsible commitment through marriage—a commitment inconsistent with the esthetic lifestyle. The key point here is that the Young Man is not completely devoid of

⁷⁴ Interestingly, Kierkegaard broke with Regine in the same manner.

an ethical sensibility. The Young Man stands between the esthetic and ethical life, and as such, he is in a transitional moment and presented with the possibility of an ethical repetition, an earnestness of soul that he does not yet possess but has the potentiality to actualize.

2.4 The Second Monologue: Repetition and Kinesis

Returning to his philosophical monologue on the concept of repetition, Constantin reasserts his claim of the importance of this yet to be discovered category, which “precisely explains the relation between the Eleatics and Heraclitus” (R, 148). Where the Eleatics denied change, Heraclitus instead proposed a metaphysics that not only accepted change a real phenomenon, but posited it as the foundational metaphysical principle. Modeling himself after Heraclitus, Constantin offers an alternative philosophical account of change for the modern era, which has “mistakenly been called mediation” (R, 148).

‘Mediation’ [Vermittelung] is a foreign word: ‘repetition’ [*Gjentagelse*] is a good Danish word, and I congratulate the Danish language on a philosophical term. There is no explanation in our age as to how mediation takes place, whether it results from the motion of the two factors and in what sense it is already contained in them, or whether it is something new that is added, and, if so, how. In this connection, the Greek view of the concept of kinesis corresponds to the modern category ‘transition’ and should be given close attention. The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could be not be repeated—but the fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new (R, 149).

In addition to recollection, Constantin contrasts repetition to another approach to truth—Hegelian Mediation.⁷⁵ Taking Hegel’s dialectic to task, Constantin argues that the concept of “mediation” fails to provide a proper explanation of becoming. Hegel tells us

⁷⁵ In Hegelian philosophy, the term “mediation” refers to reconciliation of opposite forces that is for Hegel the basis of change through history and personal development.

that all things come about through a transition from thesis to antithesis to synthesis, but Constantin questions the ability of the dialectic to provide a likely account of change and becoming. Does the change result from the motion itself? What is added in the process and how does this come about? *Most importantly, what is it exactly that undergoes change?* What is lacking in Hegel's philosophy seems to be a substantial core, the substratum, underlying the transition.

Kierkegaard's main criticism of Hegel's philosophy is that he favors the Universal spirit or Mind to the detriment of the individual soul, and Constantin's attack here seems to question the dialectic's ability to account for individual becoming. Elsewhere in the text, Constantin mocks this progress as the "1, 2, 3" dance step of Hegelian dialectic (R, 226), which is depicted as necessary, certain, absolute, working towards a finalized, rational *telos*. For Kierkegaard, the individual is a movement, but this movement is neither necessary nor rational. Human flourishing does not move forward or backward, but *inward*, and this sort of movement deals in qualitative changes of the soul that cannot be examined through or by any sort of objective, absolute, and, rational framework. In place of the Hegelian dialectic, Constantin offers the dialectic of repetition, which, he argues, *can* account for such existential transitions. In this sense, Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel is in many ways akin to Aristotle's criticism of Plato's Forms, which, Aristotle argued, are incapable of accounting for how things change and come into being. Where Aristotle offers substance in place of the Forms, Kierkegaard offers the individual subject in place of mediation. Defining the subject as that which repeats, "for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated," Kierkegaard grounds his ontology exclusively in the individual human person.

Constantin tells us that repetition corresponds to the Aristotelian concept of *kinesis* (R, 149) (motion), and we know from a series of journal entries that Kierkegaard was very much interested in *kinesis* as an existential category (See JN 258, 260). In his *Physics*, Aristotle defines *kinesis* as “the actuality of potential being qua potential.” (228-229b). For Aristotle, the primary characteristic of motion is its incomplete nature—*kinesis* is an action *on the way* to a more complete actuality. Like *kinesis*, repetition is also a “transition” category, i.e., a movement that is not complete or final, but on the way. The human person for Kierkegaard is itself a *kinesis*, i.e., something always on the way, and his philosophy of repetition attempts to carve out a theory of the self and the transitory nature of the human person through Aristotle's conception of *kinesis*.

Kinesis for Aristotle is also defined as a transition from potentiality (*dunamis*) to actuality (*energeia*)—the process through which substance undergoes change. Likewise for Kierkegaard, individual becoming is a movement from potential to actuality—a transcendence, he argues, that arises through repetition, for “repetition is always a transcendence” (R, 186). However, in addition to the Aristotelian concepts of potentiality and actuality, Kierkegaard adds two additional concepts to his philosophy of repetition, namely free will and temporality.

When movement is allowed in relation to repetition in the sphere of freedom, then the development becomes different from the logical development in that the transition becomes. In logic, transition is movement's silence, whereas in the sphere of freedom it becomes... In the sphere of freedom, however, possibility remains and actuality emerges as a transcendence. Therefore, when Aristotle long ago said that the transition from possibility to actuality is a *kinesis*, he was not speaking of logical possibility and actuality but of freedom's, and therefore he properly posits movement (R, 310).

True becoming for Kierkegaard requires a transcendence from possibility to actuality, but only within the sphere of freedom. But the reader of *Repetition* soon realizes that Kierkegaard's conception of "the possible" has little to do with Aristotelian potentiality, i.e., as an inherent nature or disposition to become a specific thing. For Kierkegaard, potentiality refers to the possibility of becoming anything at all, and more specifically, becoming something in the future. In *Concept of Anxiety*, Vigilius Haufniensis remarks that "The possible corresponds exactly to the future... For freedom, the possible is the future, and the future is for time the possible" (CA, 91). From this perspective, possibility for Kierkegaard is about some yet-to-be-actualized potential in the future.

But, as previously mentioned, that which emerges, transcends and becomes anew for Kierkegaard is the self, and one renews oneself through "choosing oneself." Transcendence of soul for Kierkegaard requires a special movement—a *taking back of oneself*. The Danish word for repetition (*Gjentagelse*) offers the clearest depiction of this movement, and Constantin congratulates the Danish language for the creation of a philosophical term that translates literally to "taking again" or "to retake." *Gjentagelse* is an activity of the soul involving the taking back of something, and, in particular, the self. *Repetition* for Kierkegaard is a double movement of soul whereby the individual simultaneously chooses and gains herself. The idea of choosing oneself is first discussed, not by Constantin, but by Judge William in *Either/Or II*, where the Judge, we recall, criticizes the esthete for never really choosing in life. Instead, Judge William argues that one needs to "choose with one's whole self" so that one may gain identity, meaning, and fulfillment in life. As mentioned earlier, Kierkegaard's notion of self-identity is inseparable from his ethics, for, as long as one lives exclusively in the esthetic, i.e., from

moment to moment, his life will lack the stability and continuity that is requisite for having a self. However, in the original repetition movement, when the subject for the first time “chooses to choose” and reaches that higher order consciousness that Kierkegaard associates with entrance into the ethical life, the individual gains an identity through the self-reflective loop of the repetition movement. When the individual decides to live according to the categories of the “good” and “bad,” instead of the “boring” and “interesting,” he gains a sense of self through having a set of ideals to return to. Consequently, the first repetition movement not only signifies entrance into the ethical life, but entrance into selfhood. However, entrance into the ethical is never a choice that one makes and is done with. As we will soon see, the self that emerges through the ethical life is a being that is always on the way requiring repeated repetitions.

2.5 Experiment Two – Constantin’s Trip To Berlin

In order to “test the possibility and meaning of repetition” (R, 150), Constantin poses an experiment. His hypothesis is the following: If he can reduplicate a previous trip to Berlin (which was for him a very memorable excursion), then repetition is possible. Constantin’s methodology is primarily phenomenological, for he is an “impartial observer whose utterances ought to have the credibility of a police record.” Although he is traveling to Berlin with a clear aim—to see whether or not he can experience a repetition—Constantin claims otherwise, hoping to experience Berlin as a “careless wanderer.”

Our author decides to take a steamship to Strausland, a voyage that he depicts as crowded, claustrophobic, and plebian. In the midst of his nausea, his experiment hits its first snare—he is forced to sit in a different seat from his previous excursion.

Nonetheless, “everything... repeated itself” (R, 151). As the steamship whistle sounds, our author, in a state of complete uncertainty and existential despair, begins his trip:

The Postillion blew his horn, I shut my eyes, surrendered to despair, and thought the thoughts I usually think on such occasions: God knows if you can endure it, if you actually will get to Berlin, and in that case if you will ever be human again, able to disengage yourself in the singleness of isolation, or if you will carry a memory of your being a limb on a larger body (R, 151).

Constantin at this point is clearly suffering from an “identity crisis”, and hopes his trip to Berlin will see a return to his normal self.

As soon as Constantin arrives, he rushes to his lodgings (the same apartment he occupied during his last stay) to “ascertain whether a repetition is possible” (R, 151). Prior to his arrival, he begins to remember the esthetic splendors of his previous visit, and the reader is treated to a very detailed account of Gensd’arme Square, with its “superb” theaters and churches, “especially when viewed from a window by moonlight” (R, 151). The details of his lodgings are recollected in the greatest of detail, from the gas-illuminated stairs of the first floor to the furnishings and décor of his apartment:

The inner room is tastefully illuminated. A candelabra stands on a writing table; a gracefully designed armchair upholstered in red velvet stands before the desk. The first room is not illuminated. Here the pale light of the moon blends with the strong light from the inner room. Sitting in a chair by the window, one looks out on the great square, sees the shadows of passersby hurrying along the walls; everything is transformed into a stage setting. A dream world glimmers in the background of the soul...Having smoked a cigar, one goes back to the inner room and begins to work. It is past midnight. One extinguished the candles and lights a little night candle. Unmingled, the light of the moon is victorious (R, 153).

The table has been set for his repetition, and it is this model to which Constantin's present trip will be compared, in order to determine, whether or not, a repetition is possible.

To Constantin's dismay, his experience is not the same. To begin, his landlord had married since his last stay.⁷⁶ Because Constantin is uncomfortable with bungling the German language, he attempts to convey his words through a universal sign of sympathy, drawing his hands toward his heart. But, Constantin is quite insincere with these feelings, remarking the contradictory nature of the landlord who, though he had previously argued the virtues of bachelorhood, now sings the praises of married life (R, 152). The symbolic significance of the innkeeper is important, for the landlord has made the transition from the esthetic to the ethical view, while our author has not.

Entering his room with great exuberance and hope, Constantin "had lit the candles" with great expectations for the nights and days before him. However, his festive mood is soon extinguished when he is greeted with a surprisingly silent Berlin night. Constantin unwittingly embarked on a wild getaway to Berlin on the Universal Day of Penance and Prayer (Ash Wednesday), and "the whole city lay in one cloud of dust" (R, 153). Expecting to receive poetic inspiration from the bustling wile of the Berlin night, she lies prostrate before him asking for redemption. Though this may appear like a setback, Constantin argues that "this discovery had no connection with 'repetition'" (R, 153). Having reached his destination and settled into his lodgings, he established a point

⁷⁶ In a May 10, 1843 Journal entry, Kierkegaard documents a similar experience on his own second trip to Berlin: "It's as if everything were designed just to bring back memories. My pharmacist, who was a confirmed bachelor, has married. He offered several explanations in that connection: one lives only once, one must have someone to whom one can make oneself understood." (JN, 162)

of return, which, though not the Archimedean point that he is looking for, provides a point of return should his experiment go awry.

Our author's optimism at this point is due largely to a musical comedy he anticipates attending that night at Berlin's Konigstadter Theater, *Der Talisman*—a comedy that he attended on his previous visit. The production symbolizes many different themes for Constantin. On one level, the production possesses an escapist element for our author, who describes the experience of seeing a play as “being swept along into that artificial actuality in order like a double to see and hear himself and to split himself up into every possible variation of himself, and nevertheless in such a way that every variation is still himself” (R, 154). Our author is suffering from an identity crisis, and the theater allows Constantius to explore several different roles, not unlike Kierkegaard's own pseudonymous literary style. Although this esthetic escapism does provide a means for philosophically reflecting on the nature of the self, self-knowledge, and, personality, Constantin ultimately describes such an experience as a “variety of shadows,” which, has awakened his soul to the “dream about the personality; everything else is still fast asleep” (R, 154). To possess an identity, Constantius reflects, is a real commitment, a true responsibility, and not a theatrical performance. However, up to this point, it seems that our author is not living up to his own words, for, without a stable conception of self, his own life is still very much in the shadows.

Constantin's experience at the theater turns out to be another disappointment. When he arrives at the theater, there is no box where he can sit alone, and he is forced to sit with a group that he best describes as “boring.” During his previous experience, we are told that a young girl had caught his eye, yet this time the young girl was nowhere to

be found, “or, if she was present, I was unable to recognize her because she was together with others” (R, 169). Furthermore, he did not find humor in the performance this time, remarking that the actors are lacking in conviction and earnestness.

Returning to the security and stability of his lodgings, he finds everything in place as he had left it—his desk, his velvet armchair—but this sort of repetition nearly sends our author into a fit of rage and he can think of nothing more than smashing his armchair to pieces:

My home had become dismal to me simply because it was a repetition of the wrong kind. My mind was sterile, my troubled imagination constantly conjured up tantalizingly attractive recollections of how the ideas had presented themselves that last time, and the tares of these recollections choked out every thought at birth (R, 169).

As much as our author attempts to experience a true repetition through a careless wandering in Berlin, Constantin’s experience never meets up with the original. At the café, the “coffee is not to his liking,” and the shop is stifling hot. At dinner, everything in the restaurant becomes all too predictable, “the same witticisms, the same civilities, the same patronage; the place was absolutely the same—in short, the same sameness” (R, 170).

The next evening, he once again attends the theater, with the same results—everything had changed, the dancer, the harpist, but for the worse. After several days of similar failed repetitions, our author reaches the conclusion that repetition is not possible and Constantin gives up on the experiment altogether and returns home to Copenhagen.

Having renounced all forms of repetition and upheaval, our author seeks refuge in the comfort and stability of his own home. The section finishes with the image of

Constantin's servant opening the door to his home in complete disarray. The servant had broken his promise not to embark on any spring cleaning, and horrified at his early arrival, slams the door in our author's face. Utterly abandoned and forlorn, Constantin reaches the pinnacle of his existential crisis: "My desolation had reached its extremity, my principles had collapsed... I perceived that there is no repetition, and my earlier conception of life was victorious" (R, 171).

With the first part of *Repetition* coming to a close, our author appears on the verge of a complete mental breakdown, and even suicide.⁷⁷ Wavering between ecstasy and despair, Constantin conveys a real feeling of instability and meaninglessness to the reader, undergoing a completely loss of "terrestrial gravity." But, what is the true source of Constantin's existential frustration? One can't help but realize that Constantin is not following his own doctrine, and that his experiment consisted only in the pursuit of esthetic repetition—in his transport, his lodgings, the theater, in the restaurant and café. But esthetic repetition is metaphysically impossible, for one can never experience anything in exactly the same way—a fact affirmed by Constantin's own experiment. Genuine repetition requires an inward movement of the soul, yet Constantin never makes this movement. But, why is Constantin incapable of true repetition, i.e., of receiving and gaining oneself through choosing oneself? Although Constantin has experienced firsthand the limitations of the esthetic life, Constantin has not made the decision to choose to choose, and consequently lacks a conception of self. However, Constantin also seems to be lacking in the soul-strength to persist through the trials and tribulations of

⁷⁷ In Kierkegaard's final draft, the Young Man does not disappear, but shoots himself. Although this change in the narrative required substantial changes in the final draft, many lines in the work left unchanged are highly suggestive of suicide.

subjective becoming in the first place. As we will soon see, mere awareness of the ethical life is not enough to grant one existence in the ethical. In addition to the knowledge of freedom to shape one's life revealed through the heightened consciousness of Kierkegaard's ethics of repetition, "choosing to choose" the ethical life also requires a type of character both of our protagonists seem to be lacking.

With the first part of *Repetition* coming to a close, our author appears on the verge of a complete mental breakdown. Wavering between ecstasy and despair, Constantin conveys a real feeling of instability and meaninglessness to the reader. On one day in particular, he describes awakening with a strong sense of well-being—a wonderful feeling that increased throughout the day, building towards what he believed might be the "complete satisfaction" he has been searching for. Experiencing an ineffable levity incapable of expression even on the "poetic thermometer," Constantin undergoes a complete loss of "terrestrial gravity." However, just as quick as this feeling of pure contentment arrived, Constantin plunges into the deepest despair:

....suddenly something began to irritate one of my eyes, whether it was an eyelash, a speck of something, a bit of dust, I do not know, but this I do know—that in the same instant I was plunged down almost into the abyss of despair, something everyone will readily understand who has been as high up as I was and while at that point has also pondered the theoretical question of whether absolute satisfaction is attainable at all. Since that time, I have abandoned every hope of ever feeling satisfied absolutely and in every way (R, 173-174).

If Constantin was suffering from a deep sense of meaninglessness prior to his trip to his Berlin, his failed experiment has incited a complete loss of meaning. But, what is the true source of Constantin's existential frustration? Constantius seems to be caught in a philosophical paradox. On the one hand, he is a man of principle, stating that "If one

does not have the category of recollection or repetition, all life dissolves into any empty meaningless noise” (R, 149). Yet, our author is also aware that principles can also ensnare you to the point of stagnation:

Time and again I conceived the idea of repetition and grew enthusiastic about it—thereby becoming again a victim of my zeal for principles. How... can one get so foolish an idea as that of repetition, and, still more foolishly, erect it into a principle (R, 171; R, 174).

Is it possible to live according to principles that do not constrain the flourishing of the individual? Is it possible to ground one’s life in *kinesis*?

As the first part of *Repetition* comes to a close, the reader is left with no resolution, no clear definition concerning what the title of the work indicates, only a bewildering narrative mixed with esoteric philosophical ramblings and a protagonist on the verge of complete mental collapse. Most readers at this point—if they haven’t yet given up on Constantin altogether—are still looking for something that can provide some sort of coherent message or meaning from our author.

Long live the stagecoach horn! It is the instrument for me for many reasons, and chiefly because one can never be certain of wheedling the same notes from this horn. A Coach horn has infinite possibilities, and the person who puts it to his mouth and puts his wisdom into it can never be guilty of a repetition, and he who instead of giving an answer gives his friend a coach horn to use as he pleases says nothing but explains everything. Praised be the coach horn! It is my symbol! (R, 175)

To the reader searching for some overall message at the end of this incredibly confusing work, Constantin offers a paean to the coach horn.⁷⁸ Is Constantin’s praise to a post horn indicative of a complete breakdown? Or, might the stagecoach horn, which Constantin

⁷⁸ An instrument used by postmen in 18th and 19th century Europe that would indicate the arrival of mail to a residence.

tells us is the symbol of repetition, provide just what the reader is looking for? On the most basic level, the horn represents radical novelty, complete randomness, for the coach horn has “infinite possibilities.... And one can never be certain of wheedling the same notes from this horn.” For this reason, the person who plays a note on the coach horn will never be guilty of “bad” repetition. One cannot help but realize that Constantin himself is not following his own doctrine, and that throughout his experiment he has only pursued esthetic repetition. Genuine repetition requires an inward movement of the soul, yet in the end, Constantin only sought a repetition experience in the physical world—in his transport, his lodgings, at the theater, in the restaurant and café. But, esthetic repetition is metaphysically impossible, for one can never experience anything in exactly the same way. In addition, because an esthetic repetition is often dependent upon things not in one’s control—the taste of one’s coffee at the café or who is dancing a particular night at a performance—one cannot ever truly will esthetic repetition, one can only wait for it to happen. Subsequently, esthetic repetition will most likely end in despair, as was the case with our author.

After his praise of the coach horn, Constantin begins talking very strangely, no longer philosophically ruminating about the possibility of repetition, but of death. There is good reason to believe that Constantin is suicidal,⁷⁹ and I interpret his final words at the end of the first part of *Repetition* as his suicide note:

Farewell! Farewell! You exuberant hope of youth, what is your hurry?
After all, what you are hunting for does not exist, and the same goes for
you yourself! Farewell, you masculine vim and vigor! Why are you
stamping the ground so violently? What you are stepping on is an
illusion! Farewell, you conquering resolve!... Farewell, loveliness of the

⁷⁹ See footnote 3.

woods! When I wanted to behold you, you were withered! Travel on, you fugitive river! You are the only one who really knows what you want, for you want only to flow along and lose yourself in the sea, which is never filled! Move on, you drama of life—let no one call it a comedy, no one a tragedy, for no one saw the end! (R, 176)

For Constantin, without Repetition or Recollection, life is nothing but meaningless noise, and he now believes in neither. But who is he saying farewell to? The Young Man? The world? Life? If repetition is not possible, does this now mean that there is no life after death?: “Move on, you drama of existence, where life is not given again any more than money is! Why has no one returned from the dead?” (R, 176) Reflecting on the Cyrenaic philosopher, Hegesias (300 BCE), who spoke so beautifully on death that some of his followers actually committed suicide,⁸⁰ Constantin closes this first part with a clear indication that he is on the verge of ending his life.

2.6 Letters from the Young Man

The first half of *Repetition* ends with a cliffhanger. Will our author, in the face of his failed experiment and complete loss of hope, end his life? Some time has passed as the second half of the book begins, and we learn that Constantin is indeed alive. His servant has since fixed his “earlier wrongdoing,” and a “monotonous and unvarying order has been established” in his “whole economy” (R, 179). In place of a search for a radical novelty and upheaval in his life, Constantin now pursues sameness, order, and regularity, anesthetizing himself through the sort repetition he so adamantly eschewed in the first part of the work. Having slipped back into the everyday, a rupture arises in his economy when he suddenly receives word from the Young Man through the post. From the letter, Constantin assesses the young man’s state—one who despite having “unusual mental

⁸⁰ See Hong commentary of *Repetition*, note 84, pg. 369.

powers” and immense creativity, is a contradiction and a coward, for whom “there is nothing left ...except to make a religious movement” (R, 183).

In these opening remarks it is also revealed that, even though Constantin’s suicidal crisis has passed, his deep sense of meaninglessness has not: “I can circumnavigate myself, but I cannot rise above myself... I cannot find the Archimedean point” (R, 186). Constantin is still lacking a core point of departure to ground his individuality, a bulwark to “transcendence,” and, like the Young Man, Constantin is “unable to make a religious movement,” for it is “contrary” to his “nature” (R, 187).

I argue that both the Young Man and Constantin are lacking in a genuine ethical sensibility and I read *Repetition* as Kierkegaard’s calling attention to this moral void in both characters. Although both the Young Man and Constantin have concern for the ethical, having “reached a consciousness raised to the second power,” they have not chosen themselves in the manner required for full transition into the Ethical (or Religious). But most importantly, because they have not chosen themselves in this truest sense, they lack a core identity to ground their existence and, hence, lack the foundation for a genuine repetition.

a. The First Letter

Up to this point, we have not heard directly from the Young Man. In the second part of *Repetition*, Constantin lets Nameless speak for himself through his letters. Now, however, the Young Man does not wish to have any sort of dialogue with Constantin, intentionally omitting a return address with each letter. The Young Man does not reject Constantin’s attacks to this point, agreeing that he was lacking in courage to carry out the

plan, instead admitting fleeing to Stockholm to evade the matter altogether (R, 193).

Nameless, however, has his own opinion of our author, and in addition to finding him “odd” and, even, “mentally abnormal” (R, 189), the Young Man pegs him as an overzealous ideologue:

It is true, every word is true, but it is a truth so very cold and logical, as if the world were dead. It does not convince me, it moves me not. I admit that I am weak, that I was weak, that I shall never be that strong or undaunted (R, 191).

Constantin is a man of principle, and the Young Man’s assessment of our author seems to get to the core of Constantius’ crisis. As much as Constantin wants to experience a genuine repetition, a true renewal of the soul, his approach to truth is inflexible and unyielding, approaching the world “as if it were dead...every mood under the cold regimentation of reflection!” (R, 189) While the young man admits to his weak constitution, he also seems to question Constantius’ overly rational moral certitude.

Larger criticism, however, of Constantin’s worldview appears to be our author’s notion of identity. Constantin’s plan for the Young Man required him to “play the part” (R, 191) of the scoundrel in hopes of turning the young woman away, making himself despicable at one moment, while simultaneously maintaining a sense of “faithfulness” in the name of principle. Constantin’s plan requires taking on an identity contrary to Nameless’ true nature, and the Young Man takes to task such a worldview on ethical, psychological, and anthropological grounds:

Are you not afraid of losing your sanity? Are you not afraid of running headlong into a dreadful passion called contempt for men? To *be in the right this way*, to be faithful, and yet to pass oneself off as a scoundrel, and then in the deception to mock all the wretchedness that so often struts

and swaggers, but also to sneer at what is superior in the world! *What head could endure something like this?* Do you not think that it would often become necessary to get up in the night and drink a glass of cold water or sit on the side of the bed and take stock!... *But suppose at some time you awakened suddenly in the night and were unable to recognize yourself, and changed places with the character you were using for your pious deception.* (R, 192)

What sort of individual is capable of pulling off such duplicity without compromising his conception of self? The Young Man criticizes Constantius' cavalier attitude toward the self, which is sacrificed for the "ethical." Like Aristotle, Kierkegaard's ethics requires ethical action to be grounded in a settled disposition of soul, and the Young Man questions whether one can maintain all the many different characters required to carry out Constantin's plan without losing a sense of self, or sanity, altogether. Genuine ethical existence for Kierkegaard requires an earnestness of the soul grounded in consistency—a commitment to a core set of beliefs that cannot be thrown off from one moment to the next. Virtue must be acquired and instilled in the soul, and earnestness for Constantin requires a sense of evenness in one's moral character—qualities that both the Young Man and Constantin do not possess.

b. The Second Letter: First Paean to Job

Where the tone in the first letter resonates with an underlying mood of existential despair and hopelessness, the tone in the Young Man's second letter exudes hope and joy through praising the biblical figure of Job.

Job! Job! O Job! Is that really all you said, those beautiful words: The Lord gave, and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord? Did you say no more? In all your afflictions did you just keep on repeating them? (R, 197)

Job is an important figure in *Repetition*; and many commentators argue that the figure of Job holds the key to understanding Kierkegaard's notion of Repetition. In order to understand the relation between Job and *Repetition*, it is important for us to keep one question in mind: What does Constantin most admire about Job? God, we recall, granted Satan permission to test the earnestness of Job's faith, which Satan argued had never been tested, for Job had lived a prosperous life. By destroying all of Job's worldly possessions—his wealth, his livestock, even his children—Satan believed that he could show the "true" nature of Job's "faith". Yet, Job remains steadfast in his faith, never once condemning God:

Then Job arose, and tore his robe, and shaved his head, and fell upon the ground, and worshipped, saying: Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord (Job 1:20-21).

In the face of a loss of all his worldly possessions, Job does not curse God, instead embracing the ephemeral nature of the physical world and God's blessedness.

But what is it that the Young Man admires most about Job? Is it his stoic adherence to his principles? No, for Job's greatness goes beyond an external ideal. Job's greatness is in his inward struggle, a movement where "the disputes at the boundaries of faith are fought out in him, that the colossal revolt of the wild and aggressive powers of passion is presented here" (R 209-210). Job's greatness is his persistence through the ordeal, which served as a perpetual test for his ethical character. In what became one of the greatest tests for Job, Satan requested permission from God to afflict his body, to which God consents, "so long as you spare his life." Having been afflicted by Satan with

“sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown” (Job, 2:6), Job still does not curse God, instead falling silent for seven days. Of this silence, the Young Man asks:

Why were you silent for seven days and nights? What went on in your soul? When all existence collapsed upon you and lay like broken pottery around you, did you immediately have this *suprahuman self-possession*, did you immediately have this interpretation of love, this cheerful boldness of trust and faith (R, 197).

Although Job’s world was collapsing, his earnestness provided the backbone to persist through his ordeal with “cheerful boldness.” This is not to say that such an ordeal was without intense struggle. Though Job’s steadfastness is true, such a persistence required great courage and strength in the face of his conflict, and there are several times when, although not cursing God, Job does seek an explanation. However, in the face of this uncertainty, Job persists.

As stated, genuine repetition in Kierkegaard requires a self-choice whereby the individual receives himself back—an earnest choice that requires great risk and faith. But there is not just one such repetition in Job’s trial, for each trial represents a repetition moment where Job is capable of a complete rebirth or renewal. Such a trial occurs not only when Job is assaulted with undeserved suffering, such as when he is afflicted with boils, but also when this suffering is questioned by his friends, insisting that he must have done something to deserve his suffering, as well as his wife, who tempts him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:10). Job’s earnestness in the face of such adversity requires a “supra-human self-choice.” Each of Satan’s tests is a new spiritual trial or ordeal whereby Job is thrown upon himself and forced to account for his entire being: “Will I curse, or praise, God?” Job best embodies Kierkegaard’s philosophy of repetition because for him, each moment of his life is a moment where “... one is staking one’s life,

each moment losing it and finding it again” (R, 221). Where Job has the tenacity to persist through the struggles of subjective becoming, both the Young Man and Constantin lack such soul-strength.

c. The Third Letter: Consciousness Raised to the Second Power

From the heights of the hope and optimism of Nameless’ paeon to Job in the second letter, the Young Man in the third letter once again plunges to deep despair, reaching his lowest point.⁸¹ If the end of part one served as Constantin’s “dark night of the soul”, it is in this third letter that the Young Man undergoes his own existential crisis:

I am at the end of my rope. I am nauseated by life; it is insipid—without salt and meaning...One sticks a finger into the ground to smell what country one is in; I stick my finger into the world—it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of that word? Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed *of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks* as if I had been bought from a peddling shanghaier of human beings? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn’t it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager—I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint? (R, 200)

Life for Nameless has become absurd, and for the first time in this work (and, possibly, his life), he begins to question his foundational beliefs. The Young Man is in the midst of a *repetition movement* where he is thrown upon himself and asked to account for his beliefs.

⁸¹ This third letter in many ways mirrors the third chapter in Job, where Job seems to go through his own existential crisis, “cursing the day he was born” (Job 3:1) and similarly questioning, as the Young Man does, why he was brought into this world.

In this moment of questioning, the Young Man arrives at the conclusion that he is solely responsible for his decisions. Presaging Nietzsche's claim that "God is Dead," the Young Man calls into question any absolutist approach to truth and, in particular, ethical truth. The individual is not born with an instruction manual and, while social norms can provide some direction in terms of how one ought to act, there is no necessary mandate. The Young Man is wrestling with a profound ethical idea—the idea that there are no moral absolutes and that the individual alone is left to herself to determine her own moral code. It is during such a revelation that one becomes aware of the power of free will and the inherent responsibility associated with living the ethical life—an awareness that Kierkegaard often refers to as "*consciousness raised to the second power*" (R, 226). When the Young Man, like Job, decries the absurdity of existence, he is thrown upon himself, at which point he realizes that he alone is accountable for himself, that he is responsible for choosing the principles to ground his being. It is these moments that Kierkegaard believes that real qualitative changes of soul occur, where the individual reaches an authentic knowledge of self through struggle and growth.

Nonetheless, although Nameless has reached awareness of his responsibility as a free agent, he still lacks the courage and strength to assert his freedom by staking his life in the real world. What is the source of his immobilization? What prevents him from acting? Generally speaking, much of the young man's paralysis seems largely a result of the overall uncertain nature of his existence, which has lost all meaning. The Young Man has waded into the liberating waters of free will again, but the ocean of possibility renders him motionless. The weight of the alternatives that the Young Man is experiencing—to marry or become a poet, to kill oneself or continue living—is unlike

any other decision he has faced. These decisions require real risk, courage, and faith, *for what is at stake for the Young Man is his own self*. Yet, the true reason the Young Man has not chosen with his whole self is that he still lacks a “self”—the Young Man is “nameless” for good reason. Although he understands the idea that he can be renewed, until the Young Man possesses a point of return in a stable conception of self and individuality, he will not repeat in the truest sense.

d. The Fourth Letter: Confidence and Boldness

From the depths of despair, the Young Man in his next letter once again finds solace in Job’s healing words, which serve as “clothing and healing for my wretched soul.” The Young Man is aroused from his “lethargy” and “restlessness” by the Job story, which “calms the sterile raging within me” and “stops the dreadfulness in the mute nausea of my passion” (R, 204). Once again, the reader must ask, “where does Job’s greatness lie for the Young Man?” In this letter, he comes to Job with “confidence and boldness,” as well as his “humanness”:

In the whole Old Testament there is no other figure one approaches with so much confidence and boldness and trust as Job, simply because he is *so human* in every way, because he resides in a confinium (territory) touching on poetry. Nowhere in the world has the passion of anguish found such expression (R, 204).

In conjunction with Job’s steadfastness, the Young Man admires his humanness, which Nameless clearly lacks. Through suffering, Job keeps persistence, struggling to understand the randomness of God’s love. Although Job does not curse God, he does

seek an explanation.⁸² It is his persistence in the face of suffering that Nameless finds so sincerely human in Job.

In this letter, the Young Man's immaturity also bleeds through, comparing himself to "a little child who pokes around the room or sits in a corner with his toys..."

Then I get a curious feeling... I cannot understand what makes the adults so passionate, I cannot comprehend what they are disputing about, and yet I cannot quit listening. Then I weep aloud; a nameless anxiety about the world and life and men and everything crushes my soul (R, 205).

Although his ethical consciousness has been raised to the second power, his youthful nature here relays to the reader a sense of ethical immaturity indicative of the esthetic worldview. Nonetheless, the Young Man's immaturity also shows that he has room for growth.

e. The Fifth Letter: Job's Unwavering Certitude

When the next letter begins, it seems as if Job's fit of madness has passed, and his healing process has begun. The Young Man returns to the secret of Job's greatness:

The secret in Job, the vital force, the nerve, the idea, is that Job, despite everything, is in the right. On the basis of this position, he qualifies as an exception to all human observations, and his perseverance and power manifest authority and authorization. To him every human interpretation is only a misconception ... (R, 207)

In addition to his steadfastness, Job possesses an intense moral certainty. Job knows he has "acted rightly" (R, 201) even though this runs contrary to what everyone else says:

⁸² See Job 3:11 "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? Why did the knees receive me? Or why the breasts, that I should suck?" and Job 3:20 "Why is light given to him that is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not?"

Every argumentum ad hominem is used against him, but he undauntedly upholds his conviction. He affirms that he is on good terms with God; he knows he is innocent and pure in the very core of his being, where he also knows it before the Lord, and yet all the world refutes him (R, 207).

Again, Job's greatness lies in his fervent belief, in his passionate steadfastness, in his "perseverance to carry through an idea when the world incessantly disagreed with him" (R, 207). Job's friends were convinced that he had done something to deserve his suffering, yet Job knew that he did not sin. So great was Job's certitude in "freedom's passion" that he even goes so far to suggest that "if there was an impartial observer, God would be wrong."

Yet, I think it is important that we not view Job's moral certitude as dogmatic assurance, for Job's belief was at all times grounded in complete uncertainty, anxiety, and fear⁸³ and Nameless suggests that "Job's significance is that the disputes at the boundaries of faith are fought out in him, that the colossal revolt of the wild and aggressive powers of passion is presented here" (R, 209-210). Although Job is certain that he is right, he is also gripped with existential uncertainty, for Job's repetition occurs when "every thinkable human certainty and probability were impossible ... Bit by bit he loses everything, and hope thereby gradually vanishes, inasmuch as actuality, far from being placated, rather lodges stronger and stronger allegations against him" (R, 212). In the midst of his steadfast protestations, Job's soul is undergoing serious turmoil. Job's faith is in his struggle, and this struggle can only be understood as deep human suffering.

The Young Man appears to have a similar moral certitude, stating at one point that "I have acted rightly... My love cannot provide expression in marriage" (R, 201).

⁸³ "Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to shake" (Job, 4:14).

However, Nameless' certitude does not seem as genuine as Job's, who is portrayed as unconditionally devout. The Young Man lacks the ethical character required for genuine certitude. The Young Man's trial is also similar to Job's in that both figures have no higher model to appeal to in their decision. As with Job, there is "no higher doctrine to make it comprehensible.... There is only a person, Job, who lives through the paradox" (Burgress, 256). Likewise, although the Young Man seeks the advice of Constantin and considers Job, in the end the decision is exclusively up to him.

f. The Sixth Letter: Tenacity in the Face of Uncertainty

In the sixth letter, it seems that Nameless' thunderstorm, like Job's, has passed. Most interesting about this letter is that the Young Man, for the first time in the work, provides his definition of "repetition":

The storms have spent their fury—the thunderstorm is over—Job has been censured before the face of humankind—and the lord and Job have come to an understanding, they are reconciled... men have come to understand Job. Now they come to eat bread with him and are sorry for him and console him; his brothers and sisters, each one of them, give him a farthing and a gold ring—Job is blessed and has received everything double.—This is called a repetition (R, 212).

Because the book is reaching its close, Nameless' literal depiction of repetition leaves the reader somewhat unfulfilled and disappointed. For the Young Man, Job's true repetition occurs when he receives everything double—Job's health and wealth are restored, and he is given new children. But one wonders whether the Young Man has a true understanding of the concept of repetition, for Job's receiving everything double is merely esthetic repetition, which, according to Constantin, is not only impossible but doomed to despair. In addition, as has been argued through this dissertation, repetition is

an active process that is not to be conceived of as a moment that is done and over with, contrary to the Young Man's first interpretation. Job's authentic moment of repetition occurs as an extension throughout Satan's trials, with each trial reflecting a continuation of and persistence through his crisis.

Although the Young Man seems to misinterpret the nature of Job's repetition, he does seem to understand the overall uncertainty of the repetition movement, which is where the value of this choice rests:

So, there is a repetition, after all, When does it occur? Well, that is hard to say in any language. When did it occur for Job? When every thinkable human certainty and probability were impossible. Bit by bit he loses everything, and hope thereby gradually vanishes, inasmuch as actuality, far from being placated, rather lodges stronger and stronger allegations against him (R, 212).

Repetition for Job occurred when it was least expected, when his existence was least certain. Yet, Job persisted in his faith, staking and risking his existence on principles that have no objective verification. Although the Young Man fails to possess a true understanding of repetition, he understands the importance of persevering in the face of the great uncertainty of life.

g. The Seventh Letter: "I Clip Myself"

The Young Man had stated in the previous letter that his thunderstorm has passed, yet we find him in his final letter once again in the midst of his existential crisis, immobilized by the "anxiety" of his situation:

All I know is that I am standing and have been standing *suspense grandu* [immobilized] for a whole month now, without moving a foot or making one single movement. I am waiting for a thunderstorm—and for

repetition... What will be the effect of this thunderstorm? It will make me fit to be a husband. It will shatter my whole personality—I am prepared. It will render me almost unrecognizable to myself—I am unwavering even though I am standing on one foot... In other respects, I am doing my best to make myself into a husband. I sit and clip myself, take away everything that is incommensurable in order to become commensurable (R, 214).

The Young Man still lacks the capacity to choose, i.e., the willingness and passion to stake his life in the world. As much as he thinks he should marry, his love is incapable of expression through marriage (R, 201). Although he does his best to clip himself and “play the part of the married man,” he lacks the earnestness to do so. The Young Man is still very much an esthete, and as long as he lacks an ethical core grounded in virtue and, in particular, the virtues required for marriage—responsibility, patience, persistence, commitment—he is not fit to be a husband. Although the Young Man (like Constantin) is capable of repetition, he lacks the willingness and courage to carry out a true self-choice—a true repetition.

h. The Young Man’s Final Letter: The Climax?

After several “incidental observations” from our author—observations which to the reader seem utterly irrelevant to the matter at hand—we receive one final letter from Nameless, which is the climax of the book. The thunderstorm that the Young Man has been waiting for has finally arrived:

She is married.... I am myself again.... Here I have repetition; I understand everything, and life seems more beautiful to me than ever. It did indeed come like a thunderstorm, although I am indebted to her generosity for its coming. (R, 220).

Nameless has been waiting for a resolution to his ordeal, but one that *would happen* to him, a “thunderstorm,” as opposed to a resolution that he would actively bring about.

Because the Young Man will not choose, fate will determine his choices for him, which in this case was the Young Woman's decision to marry another. Nonetheless, the Young Man, we are told, undergoes a true repetition, "receiving himself again":

I am myself again. This "self" that someone else would not pick up off the street I have once again. The split that was in my being is healed; I am unified again. The anxieties of sympathy that were sustained and nourished by my pride are no longer there to disintegrate and disrupt (R, 220).

On one level, the climax does provide some resolution in a book, which, to this point, has had no resolutions. Where the first part ended in Constantin's failed repetition, the second part seems to end in Nameless' successful repetition. The Young Man's ordeal has passed, and his soul has been healed. Yet, the reader is left to speculate upon the significance of the Young Man's repetition. Nameless claims that his repetition was better than Job's, for "compared with such a repetition, what is a repetition of worldly possessions, which is indifferent toward the qualification of spirit?" (R, 220-221). However, the Young Man's comparison does not seem to work, for, as stated, Job's true repetition is not in receiving back doubly his worldly possessions, but in his steadfast resoluteness in the face of each of his trials. Furthermore, Nameless' repetition at the end of part two hardly seems like an active, supra-human self-possession. Where Job's repetition required continual persistence and effort, a continual questioning of his core beliefs, the Young Man did nothing to receive himself back. His repetition is purely fortuitous. In short, even though both suffered through an ordeal, the Young man's accidental, passive repetition seems hardly comparable to Job's concerted, resolute trial.

Nonetheless, the reader is given what appears to be two types of authentic repetition in *Repetition*: one that is an active steadfastness (Job), and one that is a

“passive receptivity” (the Young Man). Many commentators, however, seem to favor the latter over the former.⁸⁴ Yet, these commentators fail to see both Constantin’s and Kierkegaard’s insistence on the active nature of *Gjentagelse*. One of the greatest character flaws in both the Young Man and Constantin is that they lack the ability to act, immobilized by excessive reflection. Genuine repetition for Kierkegaard requires a persistent struggle through life, “where each moment one is staking one’s life, each moment losing it and finding it again” (R, 221). Ethics, for Kierkegaard, is not for those who wish to sit on the sidelines and observe and reflect. Ethics must be lived! What’s more, if the figure of Job represents true repetition, the accompanying *Edifying Discourses*, written by S. Kierkegaard, clearly emphasize that “Job’s significance consists not in his having said it but in his having acted upon it” (EUD, 109). Repetition is not just about the possibility to renew any moment. True repetition requires not only the awareness of this possibility but also the actualization of this possibility. Repetition is about inward movements of soul that allow for spiritual growth, transition and transcendence. Consequently, Job’s repetition is the only true repetition in *Repetition* because his is never over and done with, but a continuous ordeal.

But what of the Young Man’s repetition? Did he not receive himself back? Yes and no. Not every repetition movement will result in an authentic repetition, for one can only receive oneself back if there is a self to receive. As stated throughout, a requirement for true repetition is an earnestness of the soul grounded in an ethical core—something both the Young Man and Constantin lack. I argue that the Young Man does not undergo a true repetition, for he did not by choice receive himself back—he was instead renewed

⁸⁴ See Edward Mooney’s “Self-Choice or Self-Reception: Judge Wihelm’s Admonition” (1996), Caputo’s *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987), as well as Garff (2000).

by accident. Yet, while it is true that he did not make this life decision himself, Nameless did undergo an inward movement of the soul that resulted in a qualitative life choice, even if he decided to remain in the esthetic. The Young Man's break from his betrothed has afforded him the possibility to pursue his life as a poet, and it is this occurrence that he rejoices in. The Young Man is no longer Nameless, for he has "found himself."

2.7 The Mad Professor Reveals Himself

Upon turning to what appears to be the final page of the work, the reader of *Repetition* is presented with a special letter from its author, with the inscription, "To the worthy Mr. X., the real reader of this book" (R, 223):

My dear reader! Forgive me for speaking to you in such a familiar tone, but we are alone, after all. Even though you are in fact a poetic figure, to me you are in no sense a plural entity, but only one person, so we two are still just you and I (R, 224).

The reader who has painstakingly persisted through this incredibly bewildering text is finally introduced to the "mad professor" behind it all. For the reader still looking for some meaning in this book, such an intimate introduction holds the expectation that the true meaning of this book will be revealed. Yet, instead of any definite explanation, the reader is given a lecture on the "art" of being a good reader and how so few people truly understand what makes a great book. In addition to Constantin's pomposity, he suggests that the *Repetition* should be read backwards, requiring a re-reading of this incredibly complicated text in reverse (R, 226). The breaking point for the reader is perhaps the true climax of the work, where Constantin reveals that he is not only the creator of *Repetition*, but also of the Young Man (R, 228). Even the most patient reader is likely to become aggravated with *Repetition* at this point. Nobody in the work is who he says he is, and if

the Young Man is completely made up, the reader is left to speculate as to just how much of the second half of *Repetition* can be taken in earnest. In addition, even though Constantin has finally revealed himself, we must remember that he is himself a creation of Kierkegaard's. From this reading, the figures in *Repetition* present themselves as reflections from a funhouse hall of mirrors. Instead of using his final letter to provide some definitive explanation to the reader as to the exact purpose and nature of the work, one is seemingly given more subterfuge.

2.8 What is Repetition?

The reader who has invested time in *Repetition* is likely to walk away with the question, "What is repetition?" As argued earlier, there are many ways to read this book, and as I have suggested, part of the philosophical value of this work is its maieutic force that aims at inciting a repetition in the reader's soul. As in the case of a Socratic dialogue, the real reader of *Repetition* will engage with the Young Man, Constantin, and Job on a level that brings him to a deeper understanding of (and concern for) oneself. The reader who earnestly works to understand the various issues and ideas from the perspective of, and in relation to, each individual pseudonym, is thrown into the dialogue—and simultaneously *upon himself*. This movement in many ways mirrors (or repeats) the transcendence of the repetition movement, i.e., the self-defining qualitative rupture or break from, and return to, "self" that one undergoes in the process of self-renewal. But even if one does not undergo a true repetition after reading *Repetition*—and Kierkegaard is not very hopeful that many will understand his "little book"—the patient reader can still reap the benefits of its maieutic, particularly if it is read multiple times. However pompous we interpret Constantin's suggestion that we read *Repetition* again,

there is real value to reading a work multiple times. Discussing the esthetic value of reading a book multiple times, Constantin remarks: “The repetition of the reading of a book, of the enjoyment of a work of art, can heighten and in a way surpass the first impression, because one ... immerses oneself more deeply in the object and appropriates it more inwardly” (R, 169). Esthetic repetition is in no way devoid of value for Kierkegaard,⁸⁵ and the above passage suggests one particular instance of how one might be enriched by the poetic power of esthetic repetitions—namely, through the re-reading of a book.

The re-reading of a book for Kierkegaard is a unique level of esthetic engagement because one returns to a literary work not as a blank slate, but with reflections and recollections of his previous read—the general narrative and plot, characters, ideas, and themes—the framework that serves as point of return for subsequent re-visits. But of deeper epistemic value for Kierkegaard are those new insights that build off of those previous recollections, ideas that become more refined and crystallized in that re-reading. Such insights can emerge on a number of levels, sometimes through discovery of new aspects of the text which in the first reading went unnoticed, perhaps a passing remark from one of its characters that, essential to the text’s storyline, seemed irrelevant the first time around. For Kierkegaard, the deepest benefits of such esthetic repetitions are existential in nature. A return to a book will most often result in a shift in the reader’s perspectives. In his first time around, the reader of *Repetition* may focus on Constantin’s bungled experiment to Berlin, but on the second reading, one may instead focus, not on

⁸⁵ In both *Repetition* and *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard alludes to the enriching spiritual dimension of the esthetic that is capable of effecting a “religious resonance.” These high esthetic states are marked by their originality and creativity, which incite some form of self-reflection. For Mooney, esthetic repetition represents a legitimate form of “meaning acquisition” (Mooney 1996: pgs. 28-29).

his trial, but on his optimistic hopes for his new philosophy of repetition, or perhaps his relationship to the Young Man. Of course, one may even shift focus to a different character altogether—the Young Man, his betrothed, the hotelier, the woman in the box at the theater, Job—as he works to deepen his understanding of the text’s true meaning.

But of course, for Kierkegaard, the real value of *Repetition* is not merely in the changing of a reader’s perspective with regard to any singular element of a text’s re-reading, *but in the changing of the reader’s own self-knowledge* as he works to reconcile his own beliefs and values from the first read with the new insights revealed in the second. Consequently, this esthetic repetition possesses value far beyond the immediacy of esthetic gains, for Kierkegaard suggests that these sorts of repetitions are capable of inciting the sort of self-reflection (or re-doubling of consciousness) so essential to the cultivation of authentic existence. As the reader compares and contrasts his re-visit to the text to his previous one, he deepens his understanding of his own moral framework, coming to a deeper understanding of himself, and the world, in the process. *Repetition* is in many ways the ideal example of a work that, through repeated re-visits and re-readings, can edify and strengthen one’s sense of self and ethical constitution. A return to *Repetition*’s pages draws the reader back into the lives of the characters, once again rejoicing in their periods of hope and exuberance, suffering, once again, in their failures, *but in new ways and on different levels*.

The experimental nature of the work allows for multiple interpretations and multiple ways to engage with the text, and as the reader, in a return to its pages, re-visits the philosophically dense path of *Repetition*’s stagecoach, she is free to engage with any one of the many trails that emerge from *Repetition*’s general narrative, be it the

ontological, psychological, or epistemological. Given the variety of directions one can take within its narrative, no reader of *Repetition* will experience or interpret this work in the same way, and it is important that interpreters of this work preserve the experimental, playful, and poetic layer of this work in order to see the true value of Kierkegaard's maieutic.

Yet, *Repetition*'s value cannot be merely reduced to its maieutic quality, for Kierkegaard does not leave us stranded in the woods with no hope for returning home. If Kierkegaard's repetition is an out of control stagecoach, its carriage does have a driver apart from its reader. Although he does not directly provide us with directions home—at times even intentionally misdirecting us with roadblocks and booby-traps to prevent us from getting there—the careful reader of *Repetition* can see the driver's hopeful vision, one that, though not directly communicated, emerges indirectly through the critical layer of *Repetition*'s maieutic. The philosophical reader of *Repetition* will likely see the ontological, epistemological, and psychological implications of Kierkegaard's experiment, yet all of these elements converge and coalesce upon one singular philosophical problem, namely the present age's nihilism, or in MacIntyre's words, "the modern moral crisis." As stated in the introduction, *Repetition* (as well as the majority of the 1843 authorship) is best understood as a response to the modern moral crisis, and in this light, *Repetition*'s experiment has a clear purpose and even solution. Although part of the force of *Repetition*'s maieutic is its negative and critical component,⁸⁶ which forces the reader to reassess his values through revealing the inadequacies of conventional

⁸⁶ Both Deleuze (1968) and Caputo (1987) take this idea to its most extreme, with the latter suggesting that the entire purpose of *Repetition* is to "run philosophy aground."

approaches to morality, the positive component of *Repetition*'s force offers a new approach to truth that is hopeful for not only philosophy, but humanity.

Kierkegaard's solution hinges on the force and power underlying the *kinesis* of his existential dialectic, which effects a gaining of self in a movement of self-renewal. Like many of his ideas, Kierkegaard presents us with variations of how the individual might gain himself within the ethical sphere, presented first through Judge William in *Either/Or II*. In response to the esthete's "dangerous indifference" to morality, the Judge's admonishment to "choose yourself" is a call for the esthete to reassess his priorities in life. The esthete, the Judge argues, has an improper conception of human choice, and consequently is doomed to despair. So long as one lives in the esthetic sphere, he will only make esthetic choices, and hence never really choose. The Judge's call to self-choice, we recall, is a call to live in abidance to a moral framework that will give continuity and cohesion to his personhood, and it is only when the individual chooses to choose, i.e., chooses to live according to a larger moral framework, that he will truly exist.

The Judge's notion of self-choice and the ethic of radical responsibility that emerges from it has been discussed in great detail in the previous chapter, where I make great effort to distinguish him from, not only modern ethical theorists, but the entire history of moral philosophy. Yet, the type of self-choice commanded by the Judge is markedly distinct from the power that effects self-change in *Repetition*. Where the Judge uses active language and focuses upon the power of the individual to bring about his own change through his own choosing, *Repetition* seems to focus more on the receptive element of the existential dialectic and the idea of *receiving oneself*. Let us now examine

the distinction between these two different conceptions of choice, which just may hold the key to unlocking the author's true message in this work.

2.9 Repetition in *Either/Or II* vs. Repetition in *Repetition*

Although the Judge offers a compelling counter argument to the esthetic worldview, and in doing so, provides the single most influential idea of the existential movement,⁸⁷ a close inspection of the Judge's call to self-choice reveals many philosophical problems, which not only The Parson,⁸⁸ but Kierkegaard himself point out.⁸⁹ Generally speaking, the larger problem rests in how someone like the esthete is capable of choosing himself when he has no self to choose. The esthete's fatal flaw is that he fails to distinguish himself from the world that he chooses, and as such, is lacking in a conception of identity altogether. Consequently, one is left to speculate about how someone like the esthete would benefit from the Judge's call. How exactly does one transition from the esthetic to the ethical? The Judge does not tell us how to become ethical beyond his simple command, and it is not likely that "self-choice" is a viable option for most esthetes, who often lack the spiritual fortitude required for self-actualization. In short, the idea of self-actualization is left unaccounted for by the Judge. While some types of people may be more receptive to the Judge's call—perhaps high-functioning esthetes who are versed in philosophy and self-reflection—the majority of the people living in Kierkegaard's "present age" do not seem likely candidates for self-choice. Is it likely that the solution to the modern moral crisis lies exclusively in the Judge's simple command? Many commentators have pointed to the limitations of the

⁸⁷ Many philosophers have traced the origins of Sartre's radical freedom in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) back to Judge William.

⁸⁸ See "The Ultimatum," E/O 2, pgs. 339-354.

⁸⁹ See JN 224.

Judge's call to choose, and most view *Repetition* as Kierkegaard's corrective for the shortcomings of the Judge's conception of self-choice, offering a brand of choice that centers on, not the choosing, *but receiving of self*.

For most commentators, the real distinction between choice in *Either/Or II* and *Repetition* is a distinction between passive and active moral agency. Where the Judge in *Either/Or II* commands the esthete to radically change his life, in *Repetition* we are witness to the failure of the esthete to effect any real change in his life. The satire of repetition, many have argued, emphasizes the improbability of effecting one's own repetition. Constantin travels to Berlin with the hopes of repeating his previous experience, and, as hard as he tries, is not able to do so. In addition, although the Young Man (erroneously) claims to have received himself back at the end of the work, it is clear that this is not through his own doing. This has led many to read *Repetition* as a criticism of the Judge's call to self-choice and the idea that repetition is something brought about through one's own will-power. While I don't disagree that *Repetition* works as a corrective to the shortcomings of the Judge's call for radical responsibility of self, these readings overlook the fact that neither Constantin, nor the Young Man, choose in the right manner. Constantin cannot reduplicate his experience at the theater or the coffee shop because those esthetic pleasures he enjoyed the first time are dependent upon things out of his control—the temperature of the café, the actors on stage in a given performance. Likewise, Nameless seeks to restore a love that he has lost, which again, is out of his control given his inability to make someone love him. Consequently, while it is true that the Young Man and Constantin are incapable of bringing about repetition on

their own, it is not necessarily a failure of the Judge's model, for neither choose in this sense.

Yet, apart from Young Man and Constantin, the Judge's theory does seem to have its limitations, and while both major figures in *Repetition* do not repeat, the exemplary figure of the work, Job, does.

The Judge's view of self-choice fails because it assumes that self-consolidation can be achieved as a matter of effort of willpower. It becomes corrected (or reversed) in Kierkegaard's later discussions of Job and Abraham. True repetition, what Kierkegaard calls 'repetition in the pregnant sense' is something received, a grant of life and world, not an outcome that can be cornered. (Mooney 1997: 284)

In comparison to the Judge's conception of choice, Job's choice does seem to offer a corrective. As Mooney rightly points out, the Judge's theory fails in its assumption that one can reach self-hood through "choosing to choose" through his own willpower. Although the reader is inspired by the Judge's call to choose oneself—and I think he is effective on this level—the specifics of becoming ethical are oversimplified in this one simple command. In contrast is the figure of Job, who we know does undergo what Kierkegaard refers to as a "pregnant repetition." For Mooney, and most other commentators, Job offers an opposing approach to the Judge's radical self-choice, one that emphasizes a more passive component of the existential dialectic, namely the reception, and not choosing, of self. Consequently, most commentators place supreme value in this passive receptive component, suggesting that authentic repetitions seem to have little to do with anything within the individual's power. Although these readings rightly place the value of *Repetition*'s corrective in the receptive element of Job's self-reception, these readings not only dismiss the viability of the Judge's call as a potential

for self-renewal in favor of Job, but incorrectly reduce the power of self choice to two mutually exclusive forces, passive and active.

Examination of the nature of Job's trial reveals that, though the receptive component of his trial is essential, his transcendence is by no means exclusively a passive phenomenon. To view it as such greatly diminishes Job's steadfast persistence for the contingencies of his trial. What we see in Job's repetition is a receptivity that remains open to the world, to others, and human possibility, yet his receptive element cannot be reduced to its passivity. Job is not a passive victim in his trial, but a figure who actively works to understand himself in confrontation with adversity, while simultaneously remaining open to the sea of uncertainties and things that are out of his control. This reading of Kierkegaard's *Repetition* is consistent with the Danish word (*Gjentagelse*), which is simultaneously translated as a "taking" and "receiving" again. Let us now return to Job in light of this claim in order to better illustrate both passive and active components of the force underlying Kierkegaard's existential dialectic.

2.10 Receiving Oneself Back: The Wisdom of Job's Repetition

I have already discussed in this chapter the intricacies and complexities of Job's trial through the examination of the Young Man's letters to Constantin in the second part of *Repetition*. Yet, it is important to repeat a key fact about Nameless' account of Job—that it is merely his own interpretation, and a rather superficial one at that. The Young Man in no way represents a religious authority, and his account of the Job trial offers no comprehensive account of the biblical text. Nameless is through and through an esthete, which means that his understanding of the world is limited to the constraints of the esthetic framework. The Young Man rightly understands the weight of Job's suffering

and the value of his thunderstorm. Yet, he altogether misinterprets Job's repetition, suggesting it occurs when his material possessions—his house, his cattle, his health—are restored, which is an esthetic repetition. The real truth of Job's repetition is not when he gains back everything "two-fold." Job's repetition occurs when, after his thunderstorm and spiritual rupture, he receives himself back as a singular individual.

Yet, it should be noted that this return is not in any way revealed in the form of some singular truth, and those who interpret the *Book of Job* as offering a solution to the problem of theodicy ignore the philosophical value of Job's trial. When Job receives himself back, he does not gain himself *in toto*. The wisdom gained after his trial is no revelation where the individual is revealed as some immutable truth, whether it be a Cartesian "thing that thinks" or in the form of some singular immutable soul that possesses the truths of the world. Although it is hotly debated whether or not the *Book of Job* offers justification for his suffering, many interpreters have questioned whether merely re-gaining his material possessions back would make God's test just. In addition, though many have rightly pointed to the soul-building component of Job's suffering, the magnitude of Job's suffering is gratuitous and egregious. Although many would agree that suffering and struggle builds character, such soul-building for Job, a pious man, could have arisen through a less extreme trial. One of the major problems theodicy must answer is, "why so much suffering?" and this question is not answered in the *Book of Job*. For Kierkegaard, to read Job as emerging from his thunderstorm happy and content with the world is to misinterpret the text. Job does not emerge from his trial with any justification for his trial, and to suggest that Job, a spiritual man, would find resolve through the mere return of his material possessions seems incredibly misguided. In short,

“in Job the question of God’s acquittal before the highest court remains unresolved”
(Mooney, 37).

Of course, Job does indeed emerge from his trial with a revelation or wisdom, yet this truth offers no consolation. Like Abraham, Job returns to the world with a horrifying revelation about the world—namely the idea that things like “truth” and “justice” lack any absolute normative value. Prior to the storm we can understand Job as a good person, who has long since chosen himself in the manner prescribed by Judge William. Job’s moral framework, according to the Young Man, is grounded in his faith, and we are right to view him as pious individual in the religious sense. Yet, this moral framework becomes challenged through his trial. With each subsequent blow of Satan’s (and God’s) test, Job’s worldview is weakened. As hard as he clings to the one explanation that his faith permits—namely “the Lord gave and the Lord took away: Blessed be thy lord”—this explanation ultimately fails to hold water for Job, culminating in his call (and cry) for God to explain his suffering. Although many have focused on God’s retort as offering an answer to the problem of theodicy, to read God’s angry rejoinder (which admonishes Job for demanding an explanation in the first place) as offering consolation for Job diminishes the magnitude of his trial. The real value of his trial seems to be, not in God’s retort, but in Job’s demand for the justification, when he is thrown upon himself and forced to question his God, his moral framework, and his identity. It is here, in the questioning of his previous moral framework, that Job undergoes a major rupture in his identity brought about through a qualitative shift in his understanding of self and world.

Job does receive himself back, but this self is markedly different from the pre-thunderstorm Job. Prior to his thunderstorm, even though Job existed in the ethical

sphere, he seems to have the same misconceptions of truth that lead to Constantin's and the Young Man's despair. Defaulting in the early stages of his suffering to the comforts of scripture and religious Dogma, Job repeats, over and over again to himself, the idea that we are not to question God's intentions: "The Lord gave, and the Lord took away: blessed be the name of the Lord." In the same way that Constantin and the Young Man approach repetition as some stagnant truth to which the individual must align his soul, Job likewise clings to God and scripture as the idea to which all his repetitions must be compared. Yet, this idea is pushed to its margins in the test, and Job is forced to reassess the true value and meaning of this idea, as well as his conception of truth altogether. Like the reader who returns to a book with a new insight, Job returns to the world with a fresh interpretation of his previous belief in cosmic justice. Gone for Job is his demand for cosmic justice, for there is no justice to be found in his trial. Gone is the idea that truth is something merely to be recollected or repeated, for Job no longer has an absolute truth that he can defer to. From here on out, Job will look to the world with an eye towards the overall uncertainty of truth and the elusive nature of self-knowledge, and this is the true wisdom that Job gains in his trial—a wisdom that is also the message of Kierkegaard's *Repetition*.

2.11 Is Job's Repetition Active or Passive?

As stated, the major distinction between "choice" in *Either/Or II* and *Repetition* seems to rest in the distinction between "choosing oneself" and "receiving oneself," and many commentators suggest that that the Judge, Constantin, and the Young Man all possess an improper conception of "choice." For these interpreters, the message of *Repetition* suggests the impossibility of the Judge's idea that one can actively initiate a

qualitative shift in one's self. Because Job is the only figure who repeats in his philosophy, and because he does not seem to re-new himself on his own—but instead through God's doing—many have depicted Kierkegaard's repetition as the corrective anti-thesis of the Judge's call. Yet, as already argued, Job's repetition does not occur when God restores his material possessions, and while I do not disagree with those commentators who point to the contingency of repetition—i.e., the fact that many factors influencing a repetition are unquestionably out of one's control—Kierkegaard's own account of the receptive power of repetition focuses more on *the receptive quality of Job's soul*, rather than those external factors outside of Job's control. After the trial, Job is shaken, and even broken, and like Abraham, we must imagine him never to look at the world in the same way again. Yet, this soul shakeup for Job does not result in a pessimistic worldview where he apathetically resigns himself to the futility and absurdity of existence. Instead, Job becomes open to the truth of the world and the truth of existence, a “pregnant repetition” that is open to the possibility of change. “This frame-shift is a move away from consciousness awaiting explanations or arguments, and toward consciousness receptive to the inexhaustible meaning of particulars” (Mooney, 35). *Repetition's* passive force then is more of a wisdom in Job's soul—an openness framed with, on the one hand, an eye to the elusive nature of self and truth, and on the other the need nonetheless to work actively towards self-knowledge. Like the reader who returns to re-read *Repetition's* pages, Job returns to the world with a new way of looking at the world, one that embraces the infinite striving of existence and the ever-changing and elusive nature of this thing we call self. Like “a beloved wife of whom one never tires” (R, 4: Piety), Job approaches each day with hope and love for the trials of existence and

the deep insights gained through such soul suffering. Yet this hope is not fanciful and naïve like Constantin and the Young Man, for Job will no longer go into the world with absolutist expectations and conceptions of truth that fail to account for the ruptures and breaks of subjective striving. Job's new openness to the reality of truth is hopeful, but also completely conscious of the trials and tribulations that lie ahead as he continually works to understand himself.

But, contra most commentators, this openness cannot be construed as a purely passive force, and to suggest this reduces Kierkegaard's ethics to the contingency of God's will and the world. Job persists through his trial only because he steadfastly works towards understanding himself, and all throughout the trial we see him actively employing his free will to fight against the dominating tyranny of God and his test.

Job's freedom is not diminished by some tyrannical power play from above. He rises up, tears his robe, and shaves his head. In these responsive gestures, in his latter bitter interrogations of the Lord, and in his final recognition of his blindness, his 'repentance' in dust and ashes, we have Job's free responsiveness, not blunt obedience to coercive power (Mooney, 35).

Job's trial is in no way brought about through his own doing, for without those tyrannical conditions, his self-reception would not have occurred. Yet, it must also be noted that, without his steadfast persistence through the trial, without his active work to understand his suffering, there would have been no self-reception. All throughout his trial, Job actively persists in seeking to make sense of the world, and it is unlikely that he would have survived his trial had he not kept actively engaged, most likely despairing in the manner of Young Man and Constantin. In this sense, Job's repetition is both active and receptive, and this is the true power underlying Job's transcendence—a power that is

enriched as he works to understand his relationship to the eternal and the infinite
uncertainty of its illusive nature.

Chapter 3

Becoming Ethical

“What really matters is openness, readiness, attention, courage to face risk. You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.”
—Thomas Merton⁹⁰

3.1 Filling in the Gaps

When Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* was being prepared for print at Bianco Luno’s Print Shop, our author was remarkably optimistic over the potential for this new idea.

This is the way literature ought to be, not a nursing home for cripples, but a playground for healthy, happy, thriving, smiling vigorous little scamps, well-formed, complete beings, satisfied with who they are, each of whom has the express image of its mother and the power of its father’s loins, not the aborted products of feeble wishes, not the afterbirth that comes of postpartum pains (JN, 170).

The comparison of repetition to a playground seems fitting, for each of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works can be read as a trip to an experimental laboratory, providing the forum for our “mad professor” to work out his ideas through a dialogue between various worldviews. But, as the subtitle to the book indicates (“A Venture in Experimenting Psychology”⁹¹) *Repetition* is a particularly experimental work. Even after a couple readings—and *Repetition* needs to be read many times—the reader is left with the feeling that the experiment is still ongoing, his lab cluttered with scattered equipment and

⁹⁰ *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 1989. N.Y.: Image Books. P.208.

⁹¹ For the difficulties associated with Kierkegaard’s use of the word “experiment” in *Repetition*, see pgs. 39-55 in “Tanke Experiment in Kierkegaard”, Hong and Perkins, In *Kierkegaard Resources and Results* (Mackinnon, ed.), 1982.

unfinished projects. In short, the reader of *Repetition* is left with many unresolved questions. First, how exactly does the individual reach that level of ethical awareness (“consciousness raised to the second power”) that initiates entrance into the ethical sphere? Throughout his 1843 authorship Kierkegaard says little about transition into the ethical life, leading the reader to believe that, like the transition into the religious sphere, becoming ethical requires some unexplainable and indefinable “leap of faith.” Second, I have so far argued in this dissertation that Kierkegaard’s notion of self is inseparable from his brand of virtue ethics and his unique notion of self-choice. Yet, Kierkegaard’s notion of self is still much too elusive throughout the 1843 pseudonymous writings. While he has remained faithful to the philosophy of repetition in his characterization of self as a being that is always in the process of becoming, his ethical subjectivity still lacks a subject. The central thesis of *Repetition* is that the ethical subject is developed through choosing and receiving oneself in the repetition movement. Yet, without a core agent to return to, exactly who or what is received in this movement? In addition, without a stable conception of self, moral culpability and agency—essential components of Kierkegaard’s ethics—become philosophically problematic.

That *Repetition* seems incomplete should not deter us from seeing the value of this very unique project. *Repetition* was generated out of our author’s own moral confusion, when he was sorting out the philosophical problems of modern morality, which had become, not only Godless, but bloodless. In an era dominated by rationalistic and absolutist accounts of morality, Kierkegaard was seeking to develop an ethical theory that was true to the complicated nature of the human condition and the process of subjective becoming. For Kierkegaard the true value of ethics is in the project of

selfhood that arises in the process of “becoming ethical,” which is neither rational nor objective, but uncertain and subject to leaps, breaks, and ruptures in one’s personal identity.

Like subjective becoming, the work contains ruptures and leaps that the reader must fill in. *Repetition*, like all of Kierkegaard’s early works, is Socratic in nature, prodding and “stinging” the reader into philosophical introspection through the various worldviews presented through the pseudonyms. Much like Socratic elenchus, which reveals the inconsistencies and contradictions of the interlocutors, the characters in *Repetition*, in their failures at experiencing a true repetition, reveal to the reader what might constitute a true repetition. From this reading, repetition reveals itself not so much in what is said, but what is not. But those looking for a more direct understanding of Kierkegaard’s philosophy of repetition are not left in the dark. The ethical subjectivity indirectly alluded to in *Repetition* is directly addressed in his *Journals and Papers* as well as the non-pseudonymous works from the 1843 era, to which we now turn.

3.2 The Rupture

One of the larger questions remaining in our examination into Kierkegaard’s ethics of repetition is how one reaches the inwardness and subjective knowledge associated with ethical awareness—what he calls “consciousness raised to the second power.” How exactly does one make that transition or leap, to reach that decision to choose to choose? For Kierkegaard, such a decision is most always instigated through some personal trial or crisis, which for him can arise out of real human tragedy and trauma (Job, Abraham, and Paul), but also out of the completely mundane (Constantin and the Young Man). Both types of crisis are existentially significant for both are

transition moments where the subject “announces itself” in a double-reflection of soul that simultaneously preserves and re-renews the self under a singular concern for his existence.

a. Abraham, Job, and Paul

Most of the characters that reach the unique type of existential inwardness required for transitioning into the ethical life in the 1843 writings undergo a crisis instigated by some sort of conflict between, their individual existence on the one hand, and the “universal” on the other. Abraham’s greatness in *Fear and Trembling*, we recall, is the fact that he underwent such an extreme trial that pitted his individual existence against society and social norms—between his faith on the one hand, and social convention on the other (*Sittlichkeit*). Though all four accounts of the Abraham story put forth in the “Exordium” of *Fear and Trembling* reveal a different aspect of his trial (FT, 9-14), all four emphasize its difficulty for Abraham,⁹² who, though wanting more than anything to explain himself to his wife and son, is prevented from doing so by the nature of his trial.⁹³ The resulting “anxiety” and “distress” (FT, 118) that results from this paradox—the source of Abraham’s “fear” and “trembling”—instigates a full-on spiritual and emotional trial that shakes his entire foundation. Abraham nonetheless persists and is

⁹² In the first account, Abraham’s face becomes “crazy... while his whole being was sheer terror,” grabbing and admonishing Isaac in an apoplectic fit of rage (FT, 10). In the second account the entire ordeal was so great that, after the trial, though “Isaac flourished as before ... Abraham’s eyes were darkened, and he saw joy no more” (FT, 12). In the third, God’s command is utterly incomprehensible for him, finding no “peace” but only strife and confusion in his journey” (FT, 13). In the final account, a “shudder” rips through his body as his hand “clenched the knife in despair” (FT, 14).

⁹³ For Kierkegaard, Abraham’s aphasia is the consequence of the fact that his trial, which is purely subjective, cannot be communicated through the Universal—a “self-contradiction” that would be a “weakness” that “nullifies all that preceded” (FT, 118).

“preserved” (FT, 118) in the process, and it is the trial that results in a stronger, more stable self.

The exemplary figure in *Repetition*—the only figure to experience a true repetition in the work—is Job, whose own ordeal also resulted in an authentic inwardness or heightened consciousness. Job’s greatness, we recall, was that he persisted through God’s test. Having lost all of his children and nearly all of his worldly possessions, Satan requested permission from God to affect his body, to which God consents, “so long as you spare his life.” Satan inflicts Job with “sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown” (Job, 2:6), heightening the intensity of his crisis. To add to Job’s suffering, his friends are skeptical of his claims to innocence, suggesting that Job had done something to deserve his suffering, and his own wife provides no stability through the trial, telling Job to “curse God and die” (Job, 2:9). Job’s endurance is what is most admired by Kierkegaard, yet it clear that this fortitude is no traditional Western “self-restraint” characterized by dispassionate stoic detachment. Although Job never once curses God, he does confront—and even lashes out at—God, demanding an explanation for his lot.⁹⁴ The trial is a struggle that destabilizes his metaphysical and psychological “well-being”—at one point Job falls to the ground piercing his flesh with the broken shards of pottery he had smashed around him. When Job recovers he falls silent for seven days, and it is here, in this enduring solitude between the rupture and return to “stability,” that Kierkegaard is most captivated by.

Why were you silent for seven days and nights? What went on in your soul? When all existence collapsed upon you and lay like broken pottery around you, did you immediately have this *suprahuman self-possession*,

⁹⁴ “Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me” (Job, 38:3).

did you immediately have this interpretation of love, this cheerful boldness of trust and faith (R, 197).

Even though Job had undergone a serious rupture in his being and suffered a complete emotional collapse, he nonetheless possesses the power to hold together his fragmented self and endure through his existential storm, collecting himself as a singular human person in and through its passing. The Young Man is amazed at the nature of Job's fortitude, inquiring into its "supra-human strength," asking whether it was innate or whether it was acquired through the struggle that he possessed the power and strength to choose and receive himself back. Although Constantin leaves this question open to the reader at the end of *Repetition*, Kierkegaard directly answers the question himself in the other 1843 work that deals with Job's struggle—the non-pseudonymous *Upbuilding Discourse* "Strengthening in the Inner Being."

Then adversity will serve such a person for strengthening in the inner being. And how would it not be so? The inner being does indeed announce itself in that concern, and adversity does indeed allow precisely the external, the visible, and the tangible to vanish and to be confused, but does it therefore always call the inner being into existence? (EUD, 93-94)

The individual arises and announces itself, not through some internal or innate tendency, but in and through the struggle itself, where he collects himself as a singular being gripped by a deep concern for his existence. It is in this trial that Job learns of the error in his reasoning, that his suffering has little to do with justice over worldly afflictions. When Job's faith is called into question, he becomes concerned for himself as an individual, and it is in that inward movement that Job receives himself back, which is Job's true repetition according to Kierkegaard.

In the same *Upbuilding Discourse*, Kierkegaard addresses the soul-strength of

another figure, that of Paul, and his adversity in the face of his first imprisonment by the Romans, and how this adversity only “strengthened his inner being.” Most admired by Kierkegaard is Paul’s “inner power or soul strength” which is capable of transforming “hardships into a witness for the truth of a teaching,” “disgrace into glory for oneself and for the believing congregation,” and “lost cause into a matter of honor”—a power Kierkegaard compares to “making the cripples walk and the mute speak!” (EUD, 83)

But even though the terrible thing happened, even though people rose up against him as assailants or deserted him as deceivers, even though the enemy persecuted him, even though the friend betrayed him, even though envy laid snares for his feet, what were they able to do to him? They could increase his concern; they could help him to drive from his soul every feeling through which he belonged to creation in such a way that he did not also belong to the Creator. But they could not prevent the concern about God that was present in his soul from seeking its object more deeply and inwardly (EUD, 96-97).

Paul’s soul-strength is an inner power that seems to only strengthen in the face of his adversity, and it is precisely through this adversity that this inner strength is gained and, in Paul’s case, cultivated. It is in the conflict between the world on the one hand, and his individual existence on the other, that Paul strengthens his whole being and concretizes his identity into a more cohesive and more uniform self. It is in this movement that “a person collects himself in a more understanding consideration of life, he seeks to assure himself of a coherence in everything, and as ruler of creation he approaches it, as it were, with a question, extorts an explanation from it, demands a testimony” (EUD, 84).

Not until the moment when there awakens in his a soul a concern about what meaning the world has for him and he for the world, about what meaning everything within him by which he himself belongs to the world for him as he therein for the world—only then does the inner being announce its presence in this concern (EUD, 86).

True knowledge for Kierkegaard can arise only when a passionate concern is awakened in the soul—the condition for authentic subjectivity. It is only when the “inner being

announces its presence in this concern” that the subject gains a true sense of identity and existence for, which are requirements for becoming ethical for Kierkegaard. Although the figures of Job, Abraham, and Paul have already transitioned into the ethical, the self that emerges in the concern is no stagnant and unwavering entity that persists stoically through future ethical trials. To the contrary, the self that is revealed is a being that is always on the way, requiring perpetual shaping and strengthening, which is reflected in all three trials above.

b. The Young Man and Constantin

While Abraham, Job, and Paul are all strengthened through their respective trials, reaching a “heightened consciousness” or concern for existence that concretizes their sense of self, the characters in *Repetition* are also subject to a similar—though qualitatively different—revelatory existential suffering. Where Abraham, Job, and Paul’s suffering is a consequence of real loss and tragedy, the trials of the figures in *Repetition* results from the despair associated with lack of existential fulfillment in the esthetic sphere. Judge William’s central criticism of the esthetic life in *Either/Or II*, we recall, is that the esthetic life will ultimately result in ennui or despair. In *Repetition*, the Young Man, who is an esthete, is faced with a personal struggle between his esthetic proclivities for erotic love on the one hand, and becoming a good husband on the other. In the face of this tension between erotic and marital love, the Young Man is forced to make an important decision regarding the future of his life: will he persist in his esthetic ways or will he make the leap into the ethical life? While we know the Young Man does not marry his betrothed (and consequently does not transition into the ethical sphere but becomes a poet instead), we do know that through his conflict he reaches a heightened

consciousness that is the condition for transition into the ethical life and becoming ethical. Because the esthete lacks a conception of self associated with the ethical sphere, and because the esthete never really “chooses,” his life will be lacking in existential fulfillment. It is for this reason that the esthete’s decisions, e.g., whether he marries or commits suicide, do not matter. Yet, Kierkegaard does not find this form of despair unfruitful, for he believes that such despair is also capable of instigating a true concern for existence that is essential for obtaining ethical awareness. Esthetic ennui and despair are revelatory because it discloses to the subject (1) the shortcomings of a life centered exclusively on esthetic pursuit, and (2) that there is a life higher than the esthetic one, namely a life focused on subjective becoming. For Kierkegaard, “[o]nly a thoughtless soul can let everything around it change, give itself up as a willing prey to life’s fickle, capricious changes, without being alarmed by such a world, without being concerned for itself” (EUD, 83). Esthetic despair is an example of bad repetition and the satire of *Repetition* is the idea that true repetition—i.e., true subjective fulfillment—cannot be reached through esthetic pursuit. Yet, the feelings of meaninglessness, absurdity, and monotony that arise from esthetic despair are also quite revelatory for Kierkegaard, having the ability to evoke a “consciousness raised to the second power”—a point affirmed by both Constantin and the Young Man in *Repetition*.

The Young Man, who sits between the esthetic and the ethical, exudes such despairing in his letters to Constantin.

I am at the end of my rope. I am nauseated by life; it is insipid—without salt and meaning...One sticks a finger into the ground to smell what country one is in; I stick my finger into the world—it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of that

word? Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world? Why was I not asked about it, why was I not informed *of the rules and regulations but just thrust into the ranks* as if I had been bought from a peddling shanghaier of human beings? How did I get involved in this big enterprise called actuality? Why should I be involved? Isn't it a matter of choice? And if I am compelled to be involved, where is the manager—I have something to say about this. Is there no manager? To whom shall I make my complaint? (R, 200)

Although the Young Man attempts to “clip” himself and become a good husband, he is still very much an esthete. In the midst of his esthetic frenzy, the Young Man is overwhelmed with a suicidal hopelessness that arises through the failure of the esthetic sphere to provide any true sense of meaning and fulfillment. However, we note that it is in this despair that the Young Man for the first time exudes an existential concern not present in the first part of *Repetition*. “Who am I?” Nameless asks, and “where is the manager?” For the first time we find him wrestling with the central existential questions—questions about self, free will, and God—apart from social convention and popular belief. It is during such a revelation that the esthete gains concern for his identity as an individual. When the Young Man asks for accountability regarding the absurdity of existence, he is thrown upon himself, at which point he realizes that he alone is accountable for himself. Although the Young Man is immobilized by the dizzying effects of the power of and burden of free will and responsibility, it is through this realization that he undergoes a true repetition as described by Judge William in *Either/Or*: “Only when in his choice a man has assumed himself ... has so totally penetrated himself that every moment is attended by the consciousness of a responsibility for himself, only then has he chosen himself ethically, only then has he repeated himself” (E/O II, 207-208).

In a similar fashion, Constantin undergoes a complete loss of “terrestrial gravity” in *Repetition*, plunging into his own sea of despondency and hopelessness.

....suddenly something began to irritate one of my eyes, whether it was an eyelash, a speck of something, a bit of dust, I do not know, but this I do know—that in the same instant I was plunged down almost into the abyss of despair, something everyone will readily understand who has been as high up as I was and while at that point has also pondered the theoretical question of whether absolute satisfaction is attainable at all. Since that time, I have abandoned every hope of ever feeling satisfied absolutely and in every way (R, 173-174).

Constantin, like the Young Man and ‘A’ in *Either/Or I*, functions at a very high level of philosophical and intellectual estheticism. Yet, like Nameless, Constantin despairs over the meaninglessness of the esthetic life, questioning the nature of “satisfaction” and “whether satisfaction is attainable at all.” Constantin comes to realize that the telos of esthetic satisfaction is an unattainable goal, and that such a life will always be lacking in true fulfillment. Constantin’s despair culminates in his failed attempt to experience a true repetition: “I can circumnavigate myself, but I cannot rise above myself... I cannot find the Archimedean point” (R, 186). Like Nameless, Constantin demonstrates a real concern for self not present in part one of *Repetition*. He realizes the importance of having an Archimedean point, a conception of self which can only arise in the ethical.

As stated in the last chapter, the primary philosophical question for Kierkegaard in *Repetition* is not so much whether change or movement is “possible...[but] whether something gains or loses in being repeated” (R, 131), and that which is gained or lost for Kierkegaard is the individual subject. For Kierkegaard in order to gain oneself in the truest sense, one must first have a self to lose. Yet, the Young Man and Constantin do not yet have a self to lose, for they have not yet entered into the ethical. Constantin has

no “Archimedean point,” for he has no core to ground his existence. On the other hand, although Job is fraught with a deep existential uncertainty, he is capable of enduring and persisting through the trial without losing a sense of who he is, because for him each moment of life is “staking one’s life, each moment losing it and finding it again” (R, 221). The reason that Job can persist through his trials is because he possesses a self to return to, i.e., an anchoring point for future renewals and repetitions—a necessary condition of not just the ethical life, but for authentic existence. But Job also possesses a soul-strength not present in Young Man or Constantin that helps him to persist through his existential rupture.

We started out this chapter asking just what sort of subject or agent underlies the repetition movement, questioning whether or not there is a self underlying Kierkegaard’s ethical subjectivity. At this point, it should be clear that Kierkegaard is building his philosophy of repetition on “the individual.” However, it should also be clear at this point that his conception of the self is categorically different from his Western predecessors. The fundamental question that *Repetition* poses is a question of identity in relation to change and movement, inquiring as to how the individual subject persists in and through time. With the exception of Aristotle, Constantin believes that Hegel, along with the history of philosophy, has failed to answer this question. But Kierkegaard’s ontology offers an alternative conception of self, one that suggests that the individual is no singular and unchanging entity, but is instead a movement, a transitioning. For Kierkegaard, the crisis of modernity—and hence the need for a new philosophical model—is the failure of philosophy to explore the richness of the self as a being that undergoes perpetual change. The self for Kierkegaard is perpetual transitioning from

potentiality to actuality, from loss to gain, from separation to requital, and for him this is the true existential dialectic. From this perspective, Kierkegaard proposes the greatest and most problematic discovery of modernity, *that we are not a singular substance, but a movement, becoming, or kinesis*.

For now, we have clarified some of the prior uncertainties discussed at the beginning of the chapter with regard to some of the logistics of entering the ethical sphere and how one transitions into the ethical through human striving. Kierkegaard compares subjective becoming to a “rupture, in which the universal breaks with the exception, break’s with it violently, and strengthens it with this rupture” (R, 78: Piety) and for Kierkegaard human striving is the ontological condition that propels the individual from the esthetic to the ethical. However, major questions remain. While we can praise Kierkegaard for putting forth a radical conception of the human person and morality built upon a self that is always on the way, *it is still not clear how the self endures and is preserved in the repetition movement*. If there is no core self that is the ultimate substance of the individual, it is unclear why or how any of these components could (and should) be held together through periods of strife, struggle, adversity, and loss. The philosophical question that must be answered is why human beings experience a continuity underlying the flux of subjective becoming, and it is to this question we now turn.

3.3 Love, Temporality, and Free Will

If existential struggle, adversity, and turmoil are necessary conditions for transitioning into the ethical in Kierkegaard’s philosophy of repetition, they are not sufficient conditions for doing so as the Young Man and Constantin never make this

transcendence. Yet, what is the albatross that denies them an identity? For Kierkegaard, the answer to this question lies in one's attitude and relationship to repetition, which, as we will soon see, entails a proper attitude toward love, temporality, and free will.

Esthetic Repetitions

Love for the esthete is understood exclusively with regard to the worldly, and all of the esthetic figures in the 1843 authorship are characterized with a desire (lyst) to find satisfaction and meaning in the immediacy of the physical world. Don Juan is of course the paradigmatic lover of the worldly, and Kierkegaard discusses in great detail the nature of his esthetic character in his essay on Mozart's Don Giovanni, "The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical Erotic" (E/O I, 45-135) in *Either/Or I*. Don Juan's conception of love is limited merely to "sensual love," which 'A' contrasts with "psychic love" (sjolelig) (E/O I, 98f) or "Greek" love (E/O I, 94).⁹⁵ This distinction, while philosophically profound, is relatively straightforward. While physic love unites two individuals in an enduring relationship in and through time, sensual love is fleeting, i.e., "a disappearance in time" (E/O I, 95). 'A' examines these two types of love through the figures of Hercules and Don Giovanni respectively.

Although Hercules could not be considered a "faithful" lover by any standard, 'A' suggests that his love is nonetheless psychic (E/O I, 94). According to 'A', Hercules is "no seducer" (E/O I, 95) because, regardless of his many conquests, Hercules truly loves each and every woman as an individual: "when he loves one, he is not thinking of the next one" (E/O I, 95). Although Hercules is unquestionably an esthete, Kierkegaard suggests that Hercules, in comparison to someone like Don Juan, possesses a deeper

⁹⁵ Kierkegaard also states that "chivalric Love" is also psychical and "faithful. (E/O I, 94)

understanding of love as something to be endured through. For Kierkegaard, “Psychical love is continuance in time; sensuous love is disappearance in time” (E/O I, 95), and it is this distinction that, we will soon see, is of great significance in his philosophy of repetition. Whereas Hercules truly loves each woman individually, Don Juan, by contrast, loves each girl momentarily: he “is a downright seducer” (E/O I, 94). Giovanni’s love is not lasting, for, once the “conquest” has been conquered she no longer exists in his mind. With regard to time, Don Juan “has none” (E/O I, 94). For him, “everything is merely an affair of the moment.” For ‘A’, this lack of temporal awareness and historicity is best expressed when Leoporello, Don Juan’s servant, shows the list of all 1,003 of his Spanish conquests: “... I do want to commend one quality of the number 1,003—namely, that it is uneven and accidental, which is by no means unimportant; it gives the impression that the list is not at all final, but rather that Don Giovanni is on the move” (E/O I, 93). The number 1,003, like Don Juan’s character, is suggestive of the transitory.

‘A’ illustrates Don Giovanni’s relationship to repetition through a tableau he once saw where a “handsome” and “young” “ladies’ man” is playing with some “young” adolescent girls who “amused themselves by jumping over a ditch” (E/O I, 108). The handsome man “stands at the edge and helped them jump by taking them around the waist, lifting them lightly into the air, and setting them down on the other side” (E/O I, 108). Important in the analogy is the fact that, though the girls are continually passing thorough his hands and transition from one side to the other, the handsome man does not move or change position. Instead, he must perpetually repeat the same movement over and over again. Like the handsome man, it is essential for Don Juan to maintain his

transitory status. Don Juan must never encounter his former conquests, for, should a girl return to him, he would perish. His transitory existence can only be maintained through a perpetual cycling of new women.

Don Juan's transitory character is a result of his immersion in the immediacy of the worldly. His identity is whatever pleasure, feeling, or emotion he is engaging in at that particular moment. In this sense, we can't fault Don Giovanni for not having a self because he has yet to distinguish or differentiate himself from the world as an individual. He is nothing more than the fleeting ephemeral affairs that he pursues.

When the sea heaves and is rough, the seething waves in their turbulence form pictures resembling creatures; it seems as if it were these creatures that set the waves in motion, and yet it is, conversely, the swelling waves that form them. Thus, Don Juan is a picture that is continually being formed but is never finished, about whose history one cannot learn except by listening to the noise of the waves (E/O I, 92).

Don Juan is incapable of undergoing a true kinesis or repetition because he lacks "thickness" and "weight" as an individual apart from the world. Although Hercules is by all accounts an esthete, his conception of love as an "enduring" through time provides a sense of self that, however crude or misguided, is given resonance through a particular temporal and historical framework. In addition, Hercules is able to truly love those he has "conquered." The major distinction between Hercules and Don Juan is that Hercules is characterized by a deeper conception of individuality based upon a conception of self apart from world—the very difference between "Greek culture" and the seductive culture of Giovanni's: "The reason Greek culture lacks this idea (seduction) is that its whole life is qualified as individuality" (E/O I, 93). *Consequently, Don Juan's demise is a result of his failure to gain the resonance of self due to an improper understanding of temporality.*

Don Juan perishes when he surrenders to the Ghost of Donna Anna's father, the commander, which represents, not only the past that he has flown from all his life, but the one thing he cannot withstand—the “reproduction” or repetition of life.

A spirit, an apparition, is a reproduction; this is the secret implicit in coming back. But Don Juan is capable of everything, can withstand everything, except the reproduction of life, precisely because he is immediate, sensate life, of which spirit is the negation (E/O, 115).

An important point here is that, though Don Giovanni is a transitory figure in the most extreme sense, he is utterly immobile and inert. Like the handsome man, Don Juan is condemned to repeating the same action over and over again.

The idea of existential stagnation and its accompanying despair is of course the defining traits of the main figures in *Repetition*. The Young Man decries his feelings of paralysis and immobility, standing “suspensio grandu [immobilized] for a whole month now, without moving a foot or making one single movement” (R, 214). Like Don Juan, the Young Man is also an esthete, a poet, and a transitional figure in nearly every sense.⁹⁶ But, like Don Juan, the Young Man's transitory nature never transitions into anything. Nameless never ascends beyond the worldly and hence, like Don Juan, never repeats in the truest sense. Like Don Juan, the Young Man is incapable of forging deep commitments with other individuals beyond the immediacy of the moment. The Young Man is not in love with his betrothed. He is instead in love with the erotic and romantic nature of the relationship as a source for “awakening” the poet in him (R, 138), which, as

⁹⁶ Constantin describes the Young Man as “at the captivating age in which spiritual maturity, just like physical maturity at a far earlier age, announces itself by a frequent breaking of the voice” (R, 133). In addition, the Young Man is in many ways the paradigmatic transitional figure in Kierkegaard's philosophy of repetition—an engaged esthete who is struggling with the transition into marital life.

Constantin rightly points out, has already passed. For this reason, the Young Man stands at the end of the relationship, and not the beginning.

He was deeply and passionately in love, this was clear, and yet he was already, in the earliest ways, in a position to recollect his love. He was basically finished with the whole relationship. Simply by having begun, he advanced such a terrific distance that he had leapt right over life. It would make no great difference if the girl died tomorrow. He would still throw himself into his love (R, 7: Piety).

Like Don Giovanni, the Young Man has no conception of love beyond his pursuit of the fleeting ephemera of his esthetic worldview, and hence has no continuity or stability in his life. Yet, in his estheticism he reaches out and latches onto something stable—the recollected memories of the earlier erotic stages of the relationship. As stated in the first chapter, the esthete will always have an improper understanding to recollection so long as recollection is understood as recovering (or repeating) something pre-existing and absolute truth or ideal. Consequently, the Young Man becomes immobilized and frozen in time like the memories he clings to.

Despite his incorrect understanding of recollection, this yearning and movement towards stability in the face of his transitory nature suggests a higher level of inwardness on the Young Man's behalf. Don Juan has no interest in finding continuity in his life, and works at all costs towards avoiding it. Though the Young Man is ultimately unwilling to commit to marriage, he gains an awareness of himself in relation to his betrothed even though she becomes relegated to the past. Though his “recollecting” results in paralysis, the fact that he is capable of viewing his life beyond the immediacy of the now suggests that he has a deeper sense of individuality than Don Giovanni. Nonetheless, the Young man still is *Nameless*—i.e., he still lacks the resonance and weight required to repeat in the fullest sense.

Constantin is also rendered inert, although his immobility arises from his inability to bring about repetition despite his undying attempt to do so. While Constantin defines repetition in the opening pages of *Repetition* as an inward movement that preserves and enriches the soul in its becoming and striving, his “experiment” in Berlin seems unconcerned with matters of soul. *Instead, he is only interested in pursuing esthetic repetitions*, which, Kierkegaard argues, are not possible given the fact that the individual has little to no control over the worldly. Similarly, Constantin’s inertia seems a result of his inability to control his life, i.e., to bring about and effect real change in the world. Like Don Giovanni, Constantin’s despair seems largely a result of a faulty conception of love and time—in particular, a conception of love and time that is relegated to the worldly. However, what separates Constantin from Don Giovanni is a yearning for stability beyond the immediacy of esthetic whimsy, and what this suggests is a deeper sense of self that someone like Don Giovanni continually avoids.⁹⁷ Like the Young Man, Constantin possesses a self-awareness lacking in Don Juan, who must die when the stage lights come on. Yet, there is something that still separates Constantin from all other esthetes in his corpus. In contrast to the figures of Don Juan, the Young Man, Johannes the Seducer, ‘A’, and even Judge William,⁹⁸ Constantin possesses an awareness that the others lack, namely an approach to existence that, not only understands the pitfalls of esthetic recollection, but approaches existence as something to be *lived forward*, and not backward. Of course, we cannot help but notice that Constantin does not follow his own philosophy, and, like the others falls into the trappings of the esthetic repetition,

⁹⁷ In addition, Constantin is also capable of engaging in friendship based upon a sincere concern for others, reflected in his commitment to the Young Man.

⁹⁸ Mackey (1971) suggests that much like the esthete, Judge William also suffers from recollection’s despairing, pgs. 18-19.

despairing in the process. Although he has the proper understanding of repetition that is affirmed by his name,⁹⁹ he lacks the commitment and “elasticity of soul” required to transition into the ethical existence sphere. While Kierkegaard clearly acknowledges the esthetic value of becoming ethical as a means to develop a fuller life, it is clear that, so long as one conceives of repetition merely with regard to the worldly, no esthete will make that transition and make that decision to “choose to choose.”

The fact that the characters in *Repetition* misunderstand the concept of repetition as an esthetic phenomenon is an interesting point of discussion, for this mistake was also made by even the most astute readers of *Repetition*. On December 19, 1843, Professor J.L. Heiberg published a rather harsh review of Kierkegaard’s *Repetition* entitled “The Astronomical Year,” in which he questioned the philosophical nature of Kierkegaard’s “little book” (R, 283).

With respect to the above statement about repetition, are we to draw the conclusion that the periodic variation which the year produces is monotonous and boring? In that case, it is wrong to transfer the categories of spirit to nature and consequently apply to it a standard that does not correspond to its concept.¹⁰⁰

Heiberg’s major critique of *Repetition* was that it was not a philosophical work at all, but instead a work dealing in the orderly repetitions of the cosmos, and hence had little (if anything) to do with spirit. In response to this review, Kierkegaard composed an open letter to Heiberg entitled “A Little Contribution By Constantin Constantius Author of *Repetition*”—a letter that, though unpublished, contains the most lucid remarks on his philosophy of repetition.

⁹⁹ Constantin’s repetitive name is can be translated in many ways, but Mackey’s (1971) “Steadfast Self-possession” (Mackey 1971, 22) seems to best embody Kierkegaard’s own definition of repetition as a philosophy that persists in its own continual self-possession.

¹⁰⁰ Selections from Heiberg’s review appear in the notes to Hong’s translation of *Repetition*, pgs. 379-383.

In this letter, Kierkegaard discusses three different “stages” of repetition corresponding to three different levels of inwardness and concern. Like Kierkegaard’s other more well-known stages, these stages are not to be construed as isolated periods to be surpassed by its successor, but worldviews that build off of each other into deeper levels of subjective existence. *With each stage, the individual breaks forth and becomes more defined as it works to differentiate and distinguish itself apart from the world.* The resulting transitioning gives “weight” to the subject—a weight that not only informs and defines the self but provides a point of return as it persists and repeats in the existential dialectic that is subjective becoming. As we will see, while the first two stages arise in the esthetic, the third becomes the necessary condition for self-choice and, consequently, the ethical life.

a. The First Stage: Repetition as Desire (Lyst)

All three attitudes towards repetition correspond to three different approaches to “freedom.” In the first stage, “freedom is first qualified as desire [lyst] or as being in desire” (R, 301). As stated above, Don Giovanni’s conception of love is limited to his pursuit of pleasures in the now. Consequently, esthetes such as Don Juan do not separate their understanding of freedom from their conception of desire, because freedom is an issue for such a person only insofar as it is a means to bring about esthetic fulfillment. In order to maintain his transitory nature, Don Juan must pursue “novelty” and avoid stability, i.e., “repetition.” In this initial stage, the esthete “fears” repetition, and its “magic power to keep freedom captive once it has tricked it into its power” (R, 301). Of course, Don Juan’s notion of repetition as a bulwark to freedom reveals the error in the esthete’s reasoning, for the real albatross here is his faulty conception of freedom (and

repetition). While part of being free entails the ability to bring about events in the real world, “freedom in desire” must ultimately “despair” (R, 301) because the individual’s choices are limited to the presence or existence of things in the physical world, over which he does not have control. Such a choice is not really a free choice, but a mindless pursuit for esthetic satisfaction. Consequently, he becomes a slave to the things that he pursues. Because Don Juan is incapable of distinguishing himself from the fleeting affairs he pursues as if gulping one drink after another, he too will become “volatized” or “lost” in the heaving sea of existence. In addition, as hard as he tries to escape repetition, “despite all of desire’s ingenuity, repetition appears” (R, 301). Even the great Don Giovanni must repeat, which occurs in the presence of the ghost of Donna Anna’s father. However, this initial stage is not completely devoid of ethical value. For Kierkegaard, in the esthete’s despair freedom simultaneously “appears in a higher form” (R, 301) where the individual gains a deeper concern for himself as an individual apart from the world. Consequently, even Giovanni, for Kierkegaard, must develop a deeper concern for himself beyond the immediacy of the moment—even if it is at the moment of his death.

b. The Second Stage: Freedom’s Task in Sagacity

What is revealed in the despairing of the first stage and attitude towards repetition is the second stage—an attitude towards freedom that is qualified, not by desire, but “by sagacity” (R, 301) or “practical wisdom” (JN, 172: Hong). In the first stage, the esthete avoids repetition. In this stage, he accepts it as a necessary condition of life. However, what he avoids now is “boredom” within repetition, and freedom in this stage is understood as a means of distracting the individual from the banality associated with “repetition.” The technique to avoid repetition is discussed in great detail in A’s essay

“The Rotations of Crops, a Venture in a Theory of Social Prudence” (E/O II, 280-300)—a work Kierkegaard references in his letter to Heiberg (R, 302). At this stage, “repetition is assumed to exist, but freedom’s task in sagacity (practical wisdom) is to continually gain a new aspect of repetition” (R, 301). In his essay, ‘A’ gives us two different ways to approach this method. The first is “the vulgar, inartistic rotation” method that is “based on an illusion” (E/O I, 291). This type of rotating focuses on the continual changing of the soil—i.e., moving to the city when one gets bored of living in the country, or eating on silver when one wearies of porcelain (E/O I, 292). This cruder version for ‘A’ is dependent upon “the boundless infinity of change, its extensive dimension” (E/O I, 291). Yet, the real method of rotation for ‘A’ deals not in “changing the soil” but in “changing the method of the cultivation and the kinds of crops” (E/O I, 292). From this stage, relief from repetition is sought, not in the amount of variation, but in the originality of the repetition within the repetition. Here the esthete practicing the rotation method freely varies his perspective and thus creates his own new and varying possibilities in the situation.

This second attitude of repetition offers Kierkegaard’s best defense of the self-contained esthetic world-view and is unquestionably an improvement over the previous attitude in that the “rotating method” displays a “higher” and deeper understanding of freedom. In addition, the rotating method allows for a type of ethics built upon “prudence” and “practical wisdom” that the first stage lacks. Of course, the rotation method does not escape Judge William’s criticism in “The Esthetic Validity of Marriage,” where he questions the sort of marriage built upon “crop-rotation” and the “secrecy system” required to keep it alive” (E/O II, 108). However, the major flaw in the

second stage's approach to repetition is the same one made in the first stage—namely an improper conception of freedom, which is “finitely qualified” (R, 302). So long as the individual construes freedom as a power to effect change in the physical world, he will ultimately despair. Per the Judge, ‘A’ still lacks a deeper temporal understanding of self, i.e., he does not think “historically.” But, most importantly, ‘A’ needs “a completely different idea of time and of the meaning of repetition” (E/O II, 141), one that focuses on qualitative changes in spirit, and not quantitative changes in the world.

c. The Third Stage: Repetition as Concerned Freedom

Like the first stage, the individual who despairs in the second stage is exposed to a higher conception of freedom that “breaks forth in its highest form, in which it is qualified in relation to itself” (R, 302).

Here everything is reversed, and the very opposite of the first standpoint appears. Now freedom's supreme interest is precisely to bring about repetition, and its only fear is that variation would have the power to disturb its eternal nature. Here emerges the issue: Is repetition possible? Freedom itself is now the repetition (R, 302).

The major distinction between the first and second stages is that, while repetition is something to be overcome through freedom, repetition in this last stage is the means of freedom (or freedom itself). *In this final stage, freedom is not conceived as a power to bring something about in the physical world, but as a power to bring about change in the self.* It is here that the self fully emerges apart from world as a being in relation to itself, and more importantly, *as a being that can repeat.* The moment the individual approaches the self as a singular individual apart from the world, i.e., as a being that can gain weight and resonance through its own power, repetition becomes something that it no longer

fears, but something to be pursued. Where Don Juan thrives in the transitory, the Young Man becomes horrified at the possibility of losing himself in “events” and “fate,” i.e., of becoming volatized by the world (R, 315). Once “the spice of life,” variation and novelty are now understood as “disturbances,” and what the individual desires now in this final stage is stability—and more specifically, *stability of soul*. During the first stage, the question was, “how do I escape repetition?” Now the question becomes, “is repetition possible?”—or, perhaps better stated—“how can I not lose myself?”

What Kierkegaard emphasizes about repetition as “concerned freedom” is that we must not perceive it as a stoic detachment from the material world.

If this will to repetition is stoicism, then it contradicts itself and thereby ends in destroying itself in order to affirm repetition in that way, which is the same as throwing a thing away in order to hide it most securely (R, 302).

The transition process in this final stage cannot be construed as a dispassionate detachment. *To the contrary, the individual being is now defined in its difference from the world and cannot be understood apart from it.* This difference, between a concerned self on the one hand, and an indifferent world on the other, is the basis of Kierkegaard’s existential dialectic. One’s identity is defined in relationship with the world, yet this dialectical process cannot be a “1, 2, 3 dance step,” but a serious rupture in one’s worldview. Both the Young Man and Constantin are amidst real crises where the self can either be gained or lost. However trivial and even comedic we find Constantin and the Young Man in their failed repetitions, the reader of *Repetition* senses that we are indeed dealing with a matter of life and death.¹⁰¹ Consequently, this movement, if authentic,

¹⁰¹ The fact that Kierkegaard had the Young Man take his life in an initial draft indicates the seriousness of his condition.

does not incite inertia and paralysis (i.e., is not reduced to some “aristocratic indolence”). To the contrary, third stage repetition is characterized by “freedom’s concerned passion,” which shakes up the individual’s sense of existential certainty in a profound sense. However, should one persist through this “violent” struggle, Kierkegaard suggests that he will be “strengthened” and “preserved” and gain the “resonance” of the self required for a true repetition and real qualitative transitions (R, 78: Piety).

He has a religious attunement like a secret he cannot explain, even while this secret helps him to explain actuality poetically. He explains the universal as repetition, and yet he understands repetition in another way himself, because while actuality becomes repetition, for him the exponential power of his consciousness is repetition (R, 79-80: Piety).

Should the esthete endure his trials, Kierkegaard argues that he will gain the secret to existence, a secret that, even if expressed poetically, will reveal to the poet a resonance of self required for understanding true repetition, i.e., the repetition of the self. Although he has a faulty conception of identity, the esthete’s internalization of the universal as a negation allows for a doubling of self that Kierkegaard associates with “consciousness raised to the second power” (R, 226). The esthete does not yet possess a self, but what he does possess is the “dialectical elasticity” that provides the *possibility* to persist through those existential breaks and ruptures at the heart of subjective flourishing (R, 80: Piety). The strength afforded by such a rupture is so great that Kierkegaard goes so far as to describe it as “ineffably religious” (R, 80: Piety).

In addition, we cannot conceive of this third stage as a mediated stage of the existential dialectic where the self is revealed and possessed forever in a single moment of enlightenment. Constantin’s “consciousness raised to the second power” does not reveal the self as a singular thing, but instead as a living breathing being who is in the

process of becoming.¹⁰² Furthermore, mere awareness of the self at this stage does not guarantee entrance into the ethical, for one still faces the most important trial of the transition: will he “choose to choose” the life focused on selfhood (i.e., the life of committed the development and deepening of individual existence through “repetition”) or instead “pawn” (R, 315) himself off to the series of events that is the esthetic? For both the Young Man and Constantin, the answer is the latter, for neither of them can “choose to choose.” With regard to the Young Man, although he claims to have received himself back and to be set free by repetition, Constantin disagrees. Genuine repetition requires a transfiguration of spirit, yet the young man receives himself back fortuitously only after having been released from the constraints of married life. In a similar fashion, though Constantin undergoes a true existential rupture, he eventually succumbs to the banality of esthetic repetition, anesthetizing himself to the stability and order of the domesticated life.

The fact that both Constantin and the Young Man have reached the highest level of repetition, though do not repeat (i.e., choose to choose the ethical life), adds to *Repetition's* bewilderment. Is “freedom’s concerned passion” as far as Kierkegaard’s repetition can take us, i.e., to the complete margins of esthetic despair, madness, and even death? On one level, the answer to this question is yes. Kierkegaard can take us up to the moment where one chooses to choose, i.e., to the moment where the individual can no longer tolerate another moment of esthetic despair, but he cannot take us to that moment where one makes a qualitative leap that would effect a real transformation of spirit.

¹⁰² Anthony Rudd, in his “Kierkegaard and the Limits of the Ethical” (1997), depicts Kierkegaard as a type of virtue theorist whose conception of ethical choice is “Aristotelianism, without the Aristotelian conception of the single specifiable telos of human nature as such” (Rudd, 59).

Whether one decides to get married or kill oneself is a decision that only the individual can make, and such an actualized decision, like other qualitative changes of the soul, is a leap, a break, a rupture in one's whole being that, contra Hegel, does not come about through some linear and monolithic process. Repetition as an ethical model cannot be construed as a normative model to guide us in particular moral actions, and it is important that we understand this. Instead, what repetition offers us is the possibility to repeat or to re-gain ourselves through a rupture that can only occur at the boundaries of existence.

When one defines repetition in this way, it is transcendent, a religious movement by virtue of the absurd, and when one has come to boundary of the wondrous, eternity is the true repetition. So I think I have expressed myself rather intelligibly to the book's real reader (R, 305).

Repetition is an intermediary phase amidst real qualitative changes of subjective becoming and not an ethical theory that, in the manner of Kant or Mill, is capable of providing hard and fast answers to life's moral dilemmas. Repetition is, instead, a theory of how one becomes ethical, and this is the true of message intended for the "real reader" of *Repetition*. Kierkegaard stresses that repetition must be understood as a boundary zone, for it is at the boundaries of existence, between the esthetic and the ethical, that one is given a glimpse into the wondrous (and terrifying) realm of human possibility. It is in the intermediary where "repetition is (not conceivable, but) by virtue of the absurd, possible" (Mackey, 88).

Yet, one cannot overlook the distinction in *Repetition* between individuals such as Constantin and the Young Man on the one hand, and Job. Even though it is clear that Kierkegaard may not take us to the moment where one chooses to choose, one cannot help but notice a higher level of repetition that is manifest through the figure of Job, who

is always in the process of “staking” his life, “each moment losing it and finding it again” (R, 221). Consequently, repetition does seem to offer something for the individual who has already made that leap. But, just what distinguishes someone like Job from individuals like the Young Man and Constantin? What does it take to “leap”—and even dance—in and through the ethical life and the existential dialectic of subjective becoming? It is to this question we now turn.

3.4 The Way: Ethics and Irony

In the last section, I explored the various ways that the individual reaches the ethical consciousness required for entrance into the ethical sphere. Yet, there is still some ambiguity about the transition from the esthetic to the ethical. In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard discusses an integral component of his stages essential to the transition from the esthetic to the ethical—the concept of irony.

There are thus three spheres of existence: the esthetic, the ethical, the religious. Two boundary zones correspond to these three: irony, constituting the boundary between the esthetic and the ethical; humor, as the boundary that separates the ethical from the religious (CUP, 448).

In addition to the three stages of existence, Kierkegaard remarks that there are also “boundary zones” between the esthetic and the ethical and the ethical and the religious, namely irony and humor respectively. The current chapter of this dissertation focuses on the transition from the esthetic to the ethical, and for Kierkegaard this transition is inseparable from the concept of irony. As we will see in the next section, irony for Kierkegaard is a type of knowledge that is essential to understanding the paradoxical inwardness required for living the ethical life.

The Concept Of Irony

Kierkegaard's *Concept of Irony* (1841) marked both the beginning of his career as an author and philosopher. The work is philosophically rigorous and radical. Prefiguring Nietzsche's interpretation of Socrates as a skeptic and nihilist, Kierkegaard examines the figure of Socrates as an "Ironist" from the perspective of Xenophon, Aristophanes, and Plato. Kierkegaard's thesis is that Socrates' fundamental (yet ignored) teaching is his approach to irony, which, like his elenchus, is both destructive and constructive.

On one level, Kierkegaard's predilection for Socratic irony is its negative or destructive aspect, attributing "many of the negative results of the Platonic dialogues to the annihilating effect of Socratic irony" (Stack, 6). Socratic irony is a negation of all absolutes, "a corrosive cutting away of pretension, comfortable certainty, and what might be called sophistic extremism (e.g., in the cases of Thrasymachus and Callicles.)" Irony for Kierkegaard is subversive, having the power to negate "[t]he phenomenal, conventional, socially determined world of actuality (which is usually the socially accepted world of overt behavior and ordinary language use)" ... as well as "the philosophical opinions of the fashionable, dominant school of 'philosophy' (e.g., the Sophists)" and "the views of public common sense" (Stack, 7). The negativity of the ironist is not specific, but is irony as "the infinite absolute negativity" (CI, 261). "It is negativity, because it only negates; it is infinite, because it does not negate this or that phenomenon; it is absolute, because that by virtue of which it negates is a higher something that still is not" (CI, 261). On the surface, irony for Kierkegaard is an epistemological category. The ironic individual is a kind of skeptic, and to approach the world from the ironic perspective is a mood that continually questions the "actuality" and nature of objective knowledge.

The attitude of irony for Kierkegaard is both constructive and destructive. Kierkegaard characterizes the destructive nature of the ironic attitude as a “higher” power, the critical discerning of which provides the individual an eye for, not what is conventional, *but what is possible*. The unique nature of irony is its ability to expose to the subject what is “not there.” To be ironic towards someone is to say one thing, but mean another. “When Socrates is ironic toward conventional conceptions of virtue, as he is in the *Euthyphro*, he is suggesting that there is “a higher mode of virtue that has not been recognized” (Stack, 8). For Kierkegaard, the very nature of elenchus is to “lead his opponents to hold positions that contradict their original assertions or that lead to conclusions that were implicit in their original stance, but which they sedulously wish to avoid” (Stack, 6). But, for Kierkegaard, one can also be ironic towards oneself. To be ironic towards oneself is to question not only who and what one is, but who or what one is capable of becoming. Kierkegaard classifies this sort of knowledge as “negative freedom.”

The negation of objective certainties, Socrates seemed to believe, would lead individuals to self-conscious reflection, to an awareness of what they do not know, and to a knowledge of what they are not. In this regard, Kierkegaard believed that Socrates concerned himself with the problem of what it means to be a man (Stack, 7).

Where objectivity and actuality are concerned with what is, the ironist becomes consumed with possibility and, in particular, his or her “potentiality for.”

As mentioned earlier, Kierkegaard’s ethics of repetition was heavily indebted to Aristotelian metaphysics, and in particular to Aristotle’s conception of movement and change as a transition (kinesis) from potentiality to actuality. For Aristotle (as well as Kierkegaard), potentiality is a capacity or capability to change or be changed, and it is

this aspect of Aristotle's metaphysics that Kierkegaard seems most interested in from the existential perspective. What Kierkegaard finds most remarkable about the human person is that he has the *potential for* change or renewal—that he is capable of transitioning from the esthetic to the ethical or from the ethical to the religious or to undergo other types of qualitative changes in the soul. Irony is a type of knowledge that is analogous to human potentiality, for the ironic individual approaches the world in terms of potentiality, i.e., what is not, but what *could* be.

Because existential irony is concerned with what the individual could become, Kierkegaard classifies irony as a pre-requisite or condition of subjectivity.

Irony is a qualification of subjectivity. In irony, the subject is negatively free, since the actuality that is supposed to give the subject content is not there. He is free from the constraint in which the given actuality holds the subject, but he is negatively free and as such is suspended, because there is nothing that holds him (CI, 262).

If irony is a condition of authentic subjectivity, we can take this to mean that before one can reach fulfillment in either of two meaningful spheres of existence—ethical or religious—she must first possess the ironic attitude. The subject who has acquired the ironic mood has liberated herself from the constraints of actuality and convention, i.e., “what is supposed to give the subject content.” The subject is negatively free because her freedom is grounded in what is not there, i.e., what is not conventional, objective, or actual. This level of awareness is associated with the inward turn that Kierkegaard associates with consciousness raised to the second power, for it is such questioning that

the self becomes a real concern. The individual who has acquired the ironic mood has moved from the philosophical question of what one *is* to what one *can become*.¹⁰³

Negative freedom, however, is also associated with a deep existential uncertainty. The subject who is negatively free lacks an absolute foundation and is “suspended” with “nothing to hold him.” In place of objective truth and actuality (i.e., the universal), the ironist is confronted with what is possible, i.e., the possibility of human existence. Within the framework of negative freedom, truth is no longer something that is static and determined. Truth is instead something to be determined by the individual through actualizing his or her individual potentiality. Consequently, the individual who reaches such awareness is often immobilized by the uncertain nature of human potentiality as well as the power of free will associated with having to actualize human potential in the real world through concrete decisions.¹⁰⁴ The individual is simultaneously faced with the undeniable “indifference” of the world, its contingency, its randomness, its complete lack of stability. As much as the individual breaks from the “universal,” the individual cannot escape her reality and will continue to define herself in the dialectical tension. This is one of the many paradoxes of existence, a paradox that the ironic helps one to understand. If one is able to persist through the conflict in a way that does not entail retreating to the comfort of recollection, he will re-emerge in a manner that enriches and cultivates one’s character. Will I marry or not? Will I kill myself or live?

¹⁰³ Both Stack (1976) and Davenport (2001) emphasize the comparison between Kierkegaard’s conception of ethical choice and Aristotle’s notion of deliberation (*bouleusis*). For both of these commentators, decisions in the ethical are indicative of real choice and real human possibility for in the individual, in the real world.

¹⁰⁴ This paralysis and subsequent despair was best exemplified by both the Young Man and Constantin in *Repetition*.

Although the subject may be immobilized or paralyzed by the “infinity of possibilities,” Kierkegaard argues that the despair associated with ethical consciousness is also accompanied by a sense of enthusiasm:

But this very freedom, this suspension, gives the ironist a certain enthusiasm, because he becomes intoxicated, so to speak, in the infinity of possibilities, and if he needs any consolation for everything that is destroyed, he can have recourse to the enormous reserve fund of possibility. He does not, however, abandon himself to this enthusiasm; it simply inspires and feeds his enthusiasm for destroying. (CI, 262)

The crippling despair that results from uncertainty of “the infinity of possibilities” is accompanied by a refreshing empowerment. The ironist becomes intoxicated with the enthusiasm of human possibility, i.e., the power of self choice to shape one’s existence instead of passively succumbing to the constraints and conventions of objectivity. We note that the subject does not completely abandon himself to this enthusiasm, instead this passion “simply inspires and feeds his enthusiasm for destroying.” Like Socratic elenchus, we can see the constructive and destructive nature of negative freedom, which is constantly tearing down while simultaneously revealing new possibilities to truth and knowledge. In addition, as stated in the last section, if the poet can persist through this “violent” struggle, Kierkegaard suggests that he will be “strengthened” and “preserved” and gain the “resonance” of the self required for a true repetition and real qualitative transitions (R, 78: Piety). Although the poet has a faulty conception of identity, the poet’s internalization of the universal as negation allows for a doubling of self that Kierkegaard associates with “consciousness raised to the second power” (R, 226). While the poet does not yet possess a self, he does possess the “dialectical elasticity” that

provides the *possibility* to persist through those existential breaks and ruptures at the heart of subjective flourishing (R, 80: Piety).

Kierkegaard approaches irony as an existential knowing that reveals to the subject the possibilities of existence through negation of objective certainty. Because irony is an existential revealing, Kierkegaard lists irony as a condition of subjectivity, i.e., as a requirement for authentic existence in the ethical or the religious. But irony for Kierkegaard is not merely an awareness or knowledge that assists in becoming ethical, but is also an existential *attitude*. For Kierkegaard, the liberation of the subject through negative freedom requires enlisting “in the service of world irony” (CI, 262). True subjectivity is something that is other than what is presented in actuality for Kierkegaard, and to be ironic requires an acceptance of the ironic nature of world—to the fact that (1) truth is other than how it is portrayed in reality, and that (2) truth (and existence) are paradoxical. Subjective truth for Kierkegaard is not self-evident, rational, or objective. To the contrary, it is irrational and subjective. In addition, acquiring the ironic mood for Kierkegaard seems essential to understanding the paradoxical nature of subjectivity. Kierkegaard seeks to understand what the individual is, yet the nature of the self is elusive, comprised of two irreconcilable components—necessity and freedom; body and soul; human and divine; mortal and immortal. Kierkegaard’s existential dialect only comes about through the conflict of human existence, which is never resolved. Yet, the repetition movement requires that the individual persists in this existential movement towards authentic subjectivity. Like the Knight of Faith in *Fear and Trembling*, who, like Abraham, must resign himself to his greatest loss in hopes that he will gain everything back, the individual who seeks to gain himself must first give himself up and

resign himself to the absurdity of existence in the hopes that he will receive himself at some point in the future. It is absurd to hope for stability given the fact that the individual is continually on the way. Also, there is always the real possibility that one will not gain oneself, but instead lose oneself to the nostalgia of recollection's comfort. Constantin's diagnosis of the Young Man is rather dead on, in particular that he lacks "an ironic elasticity," which is "also required" (R, 8: Piety) for a true depiction of love. Consequently, irony is an attitude that helps the subject in "pressing forward," for it is acceptance of the paradoxical and the absurd that allows the individual to progress, i.e., to choose in the face of "world irony."

Kierkegaard's clearest definition of irony and its relationship to the process of subjective becoming appears in an 1845 journal simply entitled: "Definition of Irony."

Irony is the unity of ethical passion, which in inwardness ethically accentuates one's own I, and cultivation, which in outwardness (in associating with human Beings) infinitude abstracts from one's own I. The result of the latter is that no one notices the former—that is where the art of the matter resides, and this is what makes possible the true infinitization of the former (JN, 223).

Irony for Kierkegaard is related to the ethical because its paradoxical nature allows for a moment where the I and the infinite collide in a moment of unity, where the individual is cultivated in a profound yet outward manner, where the infinite is abstracted in his character. The esthetic worldview is incapable of persisting through the paradoxes of existence because it has yet to understand the conflict underlying becoming ethical and the general paradox of existence. Until one has truly embraced and understood this conflict, he cannot transition into the ethical. One must not only choose to choose the ethical life, but do so with a full acceptance and embracing of the absurd and paradoxical nature of existence. Ethical consciousness requires the development of an ironic mood or

“formation”—an acceptance of the absurdity of the existence (an “ironic elasticity”) that is necessary for the preservation and enduring of the self through the existential struggle that is subjective becoming. For Kierkegaard such an irony is to be acquired through the negation of the objective world and made manifest in the passion and enthusiasm to continue to press forward in life through one’s trials and tribulations despite the absurdity of the human condition. Of course, for Kierkegaard the most essential element of subjective becoming is not merely an attitude or disposition, but its manifestation in actuality through concrete ethical decisions, which for him is when the subject truly “becomes ... conscious of his irony” and truly enjoys “this negative freedom” (CI, 264). For Kierkegaard, “once subjectivity asserts itself, irony emerges”; in asserting oneself in the face of world irony, “[f]ace-to-face with the given actuality, the subjectivity feels its power, its validity and meaning” (CI, 264). Such a mood arises only when subjectivity is an advanced stage, when, given the absurdity of the world, “subjectivity asserts itself” in the real world through resolute choice and decision, i.e., by asserting oneself in the world through a passionate commitment or goal. It is in such a choice for Kierkegaard that is indicative of a true repetition movement.

Although irony is the “way,” it is not the truth for Kierkegaard (CI, 234). Merely possessing the ironic mood in no way guarantees that one will possess the “backbone” of self to endure through subjective flourishing and ethical development. The poet is indeed capable of persisting through his existential struggles, but not through the continuity afforded by having a self. Instead, the poet persists in the dialectical tension between the particular and the universal. Although the poet rightly understands the perpetual tension of subjective becoming, there is no true continuity in the esthete’s life beyond his

rejection of the universal. The poet thrives on its negative relationship with the universal and hence never truly develops his own identity apart from this “resistance” and the “defiance.” Because the poet exists insofar as he negates the universal, Kierkegaard argues that the poet’s only “justification” is the fact that his “existence absolves him in that instant when he wishes ... to destroy himself” (R, 79: Piety). Like the Young Man—who ultimately becomes a poet—the poet’s life only reaches meaning in those moments of despair when life is of major concern, i.e., through the question of death and suicide.

While many esthetes can live their entire life in the esthetic worldview, some will not “endure the anguish,” and Kierkegaard is not hopeful for people such as the Young Man and Constantin, who, if they don’t destroy themselves in the process, will likely spend the whole of their lives wavering between the peaks of esthetic bliss and the woes of hopeless despairing. Although the esthete can be exposed to the power of self at the basis of existential flourishing, he must still “choose to choose” the ethical life—a choice that neither the Young Man nor Constantin make. Kierkegaard has done a good job of analyzing the intermediary stages between the ethical and the esthetic, i.e., how the individual in persisting through the stages of repetition and having acquired the ironic mood. Yet, like the knowledge revealed by the third stage of repetition, irony is a necessary, though not sufficient condition for entrance into the ethical life. Both the Young Man and Constantin have acquired the requisite ironic mood, yet do not transition. Does repetition once again take us to the peak of the esthetic without taking us to the ethical? What is it that the Young Man and Constantin are lacking?

3.5 Earnestness: Ethical Seriousness and Concern

Although Kierkegaard’s concept of irony helps us to understand the intermediary stage between the esthetic and the ethical as well as the necessary attitude that one needs

to actually choose to choose the ethical life, mere possession of irony, along with awareness of “freedom’s concerned passion” initiated by adversity and based in an appropriate relationship to and understanding of repetition, does not guarantee entrance into the ethical. The Young Man and Constantin possess these characteristics yet do not repeat. Is there anything else in addition to irony that helps one to not only choose, but persist in and through the existential dialectic that is Kierkegaard’s ethics of repetition? For Kierkegaard, the answer to this question has to do with earnestness, which is for him a distinctly ethical virtue.

For Kierkegaard, some virtues are more important than others, and the virtue of earnestness plays a special role in his ethics. In *Concept of Anxiety*, Virgilius Haufniensis describes earnestness as a type of truth possessed and employed through concrete action.

Truth is for the particular individual only as he himself produces it in action. If the truth is for the individual in any other way, or if he prevents the truth from being for him in that way, we have a phenomenon of the demonic [or avoidance of earnestness]. Truth has always had many loud proclaimers, but the question is whether a person will in the deepest sense acknowledge the truth, will allow it to permeate his whole being (CA, 138)

Virtue for Kierkegaard is not to be understood as a blind and unthinking pattern of behavior, but is instead a truth associated with deliberate and concerted decisions. From this perspective, his depiction of earnestness as a practical truth associated with inner states is not unlike Aristotelian phronesis.¹⁰⁵ Yet, Kierkegaard wants to make clear that earnest choices of this caliber—choices that penetrate “one’s whole being”—are markedly distinct from everyday decisions, for earnest decisions are self-defining

¹⁰⁵ For accounts of Kierkegaard’s virtue ethics, see John Davenport’s “Towards an Existential Virtue Ethics” (2001) as well as Robert E. Roberts’ “Kierkegaard and Ethical Theory” (2008) and “Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, and Method of ‘Virtue Ethics’” (1995) and “Existence, Emotion and Virtue: Classical Themes in Kierkegaard” (1998).

moments that establish identity and provide a point of return throughout the transition of the repetition movement.

Kierkegaard contrasts earnestness with disposition or habit as defined in Rosenkranz's¹⁰⁶ *Psychology* (1837). For Rosenkranz, habit entails "the unity of feeling and self-consciousness" (CA, 148) and Kierkegaard wants to argue that his conception of earnestness is a "deeper" and higher expression than this mere awareness.

Earnestness and disposition correspond to one another in such a way that earnestness is a higher as well as the deepest expression for what disposition is. Disposition is a determinant of *immediacy*, while earnestness, on the other hand, is the acquired originality of disposition, its originality preserved in the *responsibility of freedom* and its originality affirmed in the enjoyment of blessedness. In its *historical development*, the originality of disposition marks precisely the eternal in earnestness, for which reason earnestness can never become habit ... [H]abit arises as soon as the eternal disappears from repetition. When the originality in earnestness is acquired and preserved, then there is succession and repetition, but as soon as originality is lacking in repetition, there is habit. The earnest person is earnest precisely through the originality with which he returns in repetition (CA, 148-149).

On one level, we can look at earnestness as a taking responsibility for oneself as an ethical entity who understands the weight of his or her actions and its impact on self and others—an awareness indicative of someone who has made the decision to "choose to choose" the ethical life.¹⁰⁷ Kierkegaard was very much interested in the moment where one chooses to choose and the qualitative changes that one undergoes in such a decision. The decision to get married, if earnest, reflects a deep responsibility for oneself as an individual with a historical and temporal awareness beyond the immediacy of mere esthetic existence.

¹⁰⁶ Rosenkrantz (1805-1879) was a German philosopher and devotee of Hegel and Schleiermacher.

¹⁰⁷ Davenport (2001) compares earnestness to a "higher order will" in the Frankfurtian sense as a care as "self-generated responses to our given tendencies and our situation (pgs. 278-279).

Although Rosenkranz rightly links ethical disposition or virtue to the identity of the individual as a whole, Kierkegaard argues that this conception of disposition places too much emphasis on the reflexive and immediate nature of the moment. Where a disposition for Rosenkranz is second nature and automatic, for Kierkegaard a “disposition” is original. The decision to choose to choose marks the beginning of selfhood for it provides an anchoring point for the self as a cohesive and unified being under a certain goal or aim. For Kierkegaard, choices *in this original moment* are more sincere, for it is in this instance that the subject earnestly reflects upon his moral beliefs and purposefully decides upon a particular moral path, i.e., to get married, begin a new exercise or dietary regimen, or start a new career. Such a decision reflects a leap or rupture in one’s constitution, and for Kierkegaard, authentic moral decisions ought to resemble this sort of originality and sincerity.

One of the major problems that the Judge has with the idea of “habit” is that it seems to interfere with his the idea of existential freedom stating “‘Habit’ is properly used only of evil” (E/O II, 127). For William, habit seems to indicate something that is not free, and because he must be free in order to “do good,” the individual cannot speak of habit in relation to the good (E/O II, 127). The Judge’s conception of habit must be understood apart from the day to day ethical actions and instead focus more the “inner qualifications” that emerge as a result of a larger temporal framework. As Paul Martens (2000) notes, it is the “inner qualifications” and “not the multifarious concrete actions that result from them” that must be brought forth in the ethical sphere, for “after all, the ethical life is not a linear repetition of ethical actions, but a growing progression” (Martens, 97).

The earnest person is deemed earnest because he or she does not conceive of his ethical beliefs as something static, but instead as something that must be repeatedly returned and recommitted to: “The earnest person is earnest precisely through the originality with which he returns in repetition” (CA, 149). In a repetition movement, the individual is simultaneously thrown out of and back upon himself in the form of a recommitment (or break from) his moral beliefs. The subject is “thrown” out of and returns to him or herself in a recommitment to that original choice manifest through particular concrete actions. The return is not a repeating or representing of the virtue in a static or absolute way, but a return that possesses the cheerful “blessedness” present in the original moment of “choosing to choose.” When the individual makes the decision to get married, such a decision is not over and done with once the ceremony has ended and the guests have left. To the contrary, the nature of marriage requires a continual recommitment that is to be renewed, not just annually, but on a daily basis through individual acts of love. It is in these individual choices where the individual asserts himself as a being that can move in different ways through actualizing virtue via real world decisions while “crystallizing its alternatives in the process” (Davenport, 280). In this sense, habit cannot be a rote repetition of cultural, social, or religious norms executed out of years of unthinking behavior. Instead, earnest choices reflect moments when the individual collects him or herself as a singular being and conceives himself as a being that is to be gained through the repetition movement.

Earnestness is a distinctly ethical virtue because being ethical requires a subjective sincerity and concern for the ethical life. “One may be born with dispositions, but no one is born with earnestness” (CA, 150). Where the esthete sees the world as nothing more

than a series of unrelated events, the person who is earnest conceives the self with regard to a larger temporal whole encompassed in perpetual subjective becoming. Kierkegaard associates the virtue of earnestness with “repetition” and “the eternal,” and a lack of any notion of the eternal with habit. The mechanical and reflexive nature of “habit” for Kierkegaard seems largely a result of a lack of passionate commitment to soul, for “habit arises as soon as the eternal disappears from repetition” (CA, 149). In this sense, the reason that one has continuity to one’s soul is because one possesses earnestness.

[H]abit arises as soon as the eternal disappears from repetition. When the originality in earnestness is acquired and preserved, then there is succession and repetition, but as soon as originality is lacking in repetition, there is habit. The earnest person is earnest precisely through the originality with which he returns in repetition (CA, 148-149).

Earnestness is not just a virtue among others in Kierkegaard’s ethics. Earnestness is a foundational virtue, i.e., a “proto-virtue.”¹⁰⁸ As mentioned throughout this dissertation, the reason why the ethical plays such an essential role in Kierkegaard’s ethics is that entrance into the ethical marks the creation of the self. Prior to entrance into the ethical, there is no self because there is no continuity or stability.¹⁰⁹ When the individual decides to live the ethical life, he collects himself as a person under the framework of living according to the categories of “good and bad” and gains a concern for oneself as an existing subject. Earnestness is a virtue that solidifies this commitment of living the good life because it emphasizes a sincere commitment and concern for the self as an existential being: “Earnestness in this sense means the personality itself” (CA, 149).

¹⁰⁸ See Davenport, “Existential Virtue Ethics” (2001).

¹⁰⁹ Oscar Wilde’s “The Importance of Being Earnest” (1895) illustrates this idea quite effectively, for both Moncrieff and Worthing are confronted with issues of identity given the duplicity of their respective characters.

In the same way that we saw the importance of “irony’s truth” in the transition of the self in the repetition movement with regard to providing cohesion to the self, earnestness is also foundational to the creation of character, providing cohesion the self, but not in a static way. Kierkegaard was fundamentally concerned with how subjective becoming could arise without obliterating what has already been, *and for him the cohesion that is provided in a repetition movement results from these commitments and passions that preserve and enrich the subject through endless striving*. Gaining oneself in the manner that will lead to authentic ethical existence requires virtues that preserve and enrich the subject in the process of subjective becoming without a stifling existential stasis. Of course, the Young Man (and his creator Constantin) were lacking in earnestness, lacking in the “iron-like consistency and firmness” (Piety, 80) which allows one to endure and persist through the trials of existential flourishing. Had the Young Man possessed such a soul-strength, “... [h]e would have gained a fact of consciousness he could have stuck with, and which would never have been equivocal to him, but pure seriousness” (R, 80: Piety).

3.6 Ethical Repetitions

Now that we know what the high esthetes lack, namely the virtue of earnestness, does Kierkegaard provide us with any exemplars of repetition other than Job (a religious figure), who repeat in the truest sense for Kierkegaard? If not, can we only understand repetition as a religious category? I will return to the distinction between ethical and religious repetitions in the next section. For now I want to focus exclusively on ethical repetitions and my claim that repetition is fundamentally an ethical “category.”

If repetition is fundamentally an ethical category, just who is the ethical exemplar of repetition? One may be initially inclined to believe that Judge William is a likely candidate seeing the key ideas in Kierkegaard's philosophy of repetition—namely his description of an ethics based upon passionate “self-choice” and enduring commitment through marital love—arise through his teachings. I have discussed the relationship of *Either/Or II* to *Repetition* in great detail in the first chapter of this dissertation, but a few things must be said about the Judge. First, however we want to interpret the judge and his role in the philosophy of repetition, it is important to note that the Judge fails—a point that not only the Parson,¹¹⁰ but Kierkegaard himself, points out.

The ethical moment is in combat. The Judge is not instructing in *gemultich* fashion, but is struggling in existence because he cannot end things at this point, even if at this point he is able to conquer every esthetic stage with pathos, though he cannot measure up to the aesthetes in wit (JN 224).

While many have questioned the Judge as model for ethical conduct in Kierkegaard's philosophy,¹¹¹ the reader is given good reason to question the Judge's own earnestness. However prudent Judge William is and however convincing we find his account of marital love as a perfect intermingling of the esthetic and the ethical, the reader is given the impression that he is going through the motions of morality. The Judge's conception of the ethical is “still deeply compromised by the common sense of the day, the authority of tradition, and the social forms that are acceptable in bourgeois society” (Perkins, IKC 4). As Louis Mackey (1971) points out, the Judge is “commonplace in most every aspect: marriage, professional position, name, house, social status,” and we have no true reason to uphold the Judge as a moral exemplar. One gets the sense that the Judge's

¹¹⁰ See “The Ultimatum,” E/O 2, pgs. 339-354.

¹¹¹ See in particular Wanda Warren Berry's “Judge William's Judging Woman” in the *International Kierkegaard Commentary Vol. 4* (1995).

conception of the ethical, though indicative of the highest social prudence, is just that—his conception of marriage relegated to “the common sense and customs of the time”—a point that William himself seems to acknowledge.¹¹² The Judge is unquestionably a product of his times and perhaps blind to some of the “unquestioned cultural assumptions of his time” (Hong, 1980: pg. 2). Although he rightly understands the nature of the ethical in a person as “that by which he becomes what he becomes” (E/O, 2:178) one gets the impression that, like the esthetes, he has become inert. We must remember that the real question posed by *Either/Or* is the same as Aristotle’s, “how ought I to live?” Like the various modes of the esthetic presented by the esthetic worldview, the ethical also has multiple manifestations. Consequently, what the Judge represents in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is not *the* ethical life, but one type of ethical existence based upon one particular understanding of morality.

For Kierkegaard, marriage is unquestionably an ethical choice, but marriage as an expression of the ethical must be understood apart from the social norms and customs that it is part of. In one of his most private of journal entries¹¹³ Kierkegaard discusses his own conception of marriage within the context of his decision to break his engagement with Regine.

Had I faith I would have stayed with Regine. Praise and thanks be to God ... it would certainly have happened. But with marriage it isn’t the case that everything is sold “as is” when the hammer falls; here it is a matter of a little honesty toward the past. Here again my chivalry is obvious. Had I not honored her more than myself as my future wife, had I not been more prouder of her honor than of my own, I would have held my tongue and fulfilled her wish and mine, let

¹¹² The idea that the Judge is beginning to see the limits of culturally informed conceptions of marital love is suggested by Hong in the introduction of *The International Kierkegaard Commentary Volume 4*, pgs. 1-4.

¹¹³ Kierkegaard removed two pages from this particular entry: “Presumably he had written something too intimate” (Garff, 250).

myself be married to her—so many a marriage conceals little stories. I didn't want that, she would have been my concubine, and then I would rather have murdered her (JN 164-165).

In the above passage, Kierkegaard remarks that, had he not broken off the engagement, he would have dishonored her. We cannot know for sure what he meant by this, but what is clear is his distinguishing between two types of married life, i.e., one where “one holds their tongue” and lives a relationship of “concealed stories,” and a married life that is “honest.” On one level, we can take this to mean that marriage for Kierkegaard cannot be construed as a social institution where one's individual character is to be compromised to the conformity of the institution of marriage, but as means where two individuals can flourish as individuals within the context of a loving and caring relationship. The decision to get married, like entrance into the ethical life, is not a decision that is over and done with once the vows have been exchanged—it is an ongoing commitment that is to be renewed as each individual grows and changes within the relationship. For Kierkegaard, the commitment to marriage must be sincere, but it must also allow for the other to emerge as her own person. From the above journal entry, it is clear that Kierkegaard respected Regine and the person that she would ultimately become. But, for whatever reason he was incapable of honoring her in this way. Kierkegaard understood the commitment of marriage and the enduring strength required for marital love. From this perspective, Kierkegaard rises above the traditional ethical norms and in this moment forges an identity for himself as a being with deep concern for not only himself, but others.

From this reading, the exemplary figure of ethical repetition is Kierkegaard himself,¹¹⁴ proceeding through the existential dialectic by holding together the absurdity of existence, deepening his concern for himself through deeper states of inwardness. While we can imagine other types of ethical relationships within the context of this philosophy of repetition, deep friendships that can joyfully persist, what is most intriguing here—and the subject of this dissertation—is the radical individualism at the foundation of this ethical theory. Although one can become existentially enriched within the context of a happy and healthy marriage, the individual can become just as enriched in his relationship with himself as he breaks forth in the transcendence of the repetition movement. *The deeper one's concern of repetition—i.e., of one's relationship to and understanding of love, free will, and temporality—the more defined the individual becomes apart from the world.* The person who repeats in the fullest sense breaks forth out of the universal and persists through this becoming as a singular being.

It is here, in the creation of a philosophy focused on individual becoming in and through a world of paradox, absurdity, and conflict, that we can consider Kierkegaard the father of Existentialism. Yet, few commentators have fully examined the richness of his ethics of repetition as a legitimate ethical theory. From one reading, we can see Kierkegaard's ethics of repetition as possessing a eudemonistic element insofar as it focuses on the cultivation of the individual character through choice.¹¹⁵ While it is true that Kierkegaard's conceptions of virtue, choice, and character vary greatly from Aristotle's, we see both philosophers focusing on the strengthening of moral character.

¹¹⁴ Although some perceive Kierkegaard's break with Regine as cruel, he damaged his own character in the process, which says something of the sacrificial nature of his conception of the ethical. In addition, we must keep in mind that his breaking off of the engagement remained one of Kierkegaard's greatest regrets in life.

¹¹⁵ Davenport (2001) provides the most comprehensive defense of Kierkegaard's virtue ethics.

In the epigraph of *Repetition*, Constantin cites a quote from Flavious Philostratus' *The Elder's Hero Tales*: "On wild trees the flowers are fragrant, on cultivated trees, the fruits." The "fruit" of existence for Kierkegaard is the individual character cultivated in the transcendence of the repetition movement. Although both Aristotle and Kierkegaard argue that one becomes ethical through concerted choices, for Aristotle the primary force underlying the shaping of character are the individual actions that work towards developing the various virtues in one's soul. For Kierkegaard, although individual actions help to shape one's character, the original decision to "choose to choose" is of greater importance in his philosophy, for it this original decision that provides the point of return for one's transcendence. In addition, contra Aristotle, the character that is defined through choice cannot be understood as having any sort of substantial ontological foundation in the manner of Aristotle. For Kierkegaard, the individual can only be understood as a becoming *and only can be said to exist insofar as it is a being that is on the way*—an idea that is Kierkegaard's major contribution not only to the Existentialist tradition, but also to all of post-modern thought. Finally, Kierkegaard does not focus so much on the cultivation of virtues as he does "attitudes" or "moods" that cannot be classified as "practical wisdom"—at least insofar as practical wisdom is understood as applied virtue. Although earnestness and irony are indeed dispositions that help the individual in persisting through the project of selfhood, these moods are more representative of a self-knowledge that reflects deeper levels of awareness and consciousness.

Ethically speaking, repetition is a philosophy of becoming focused on the actualization of self through the choosing and gaining of oneself in the existential

dialectic of the repetition movement. Kierkegaard's major criticism of the Judge is that, in comparison to the esthetes, the Judge lacks "wit," and we can take this to mean that he lacks the creative capacity to shape his life beyond the limitations of *Sittlichkeit*. In a journal entry around the time of *Repetition*'s genesis, Kierkegaard takes note of Aristotle's distinction between *poeisis* (to make) and *prattein* (to act)¹¹⁶ that we should take note of. What distinguishes the Judge from someone like the Young Man is that the poet is, a maker—"a maker in the realm of the possible rather than in the realm of what is or has been." *Repetition* is also in the business of "making," except instead of artifacts, repetition focuses exclusively on the "making" or cultivation of the individual human person. The "fruits" of this ethics of soul cultivation is a type of love that manifests in a love of life and in particular a love of the temporal flourishing at the heart of subjective becoming.

3.7 Deeper Repetitions: The God-Man Relationship

Of course, the good philosopher must still question Kierkegaard's conception of self. One becomes ethical by choosing oneself, yet prior to choosing oneself there is no self to receive—"To speak of choosing oneself is of course paradoxical, for the self does not exist until it is brought forth by choice, and yet the self must exist if it is to choose" (Caputo, 29). Closely related to this problem is the paradox underlying the very idea of losing and gaining oneself: "... if a person possesses his soul, he certainly does not need to gain it, and if he does not possess it, how then can he gain it, since the soul itself is the ultimate condition that is presupposed in every acquiring, consequently also in gaining the soul" (EUD, 162-163). The problem here is similar to Meno's Paradox in that, if one

¹¹⁶ Hong (xxiii) in his introduction to *Fear and Trembling and Repetition* (1983) places emphasis on this particular journal entry, JN V 5605, and its relation to *Repetition*'s "experimental psychology."

already “possesses” oneself, then it is not necessary to gain oneself. Yet, if one does not possess oneself, how can one gain oneself without the very condition for such an acquisition, namely the soul? With regard to these problems, Kierkegaard directs us to what he argues is the foundation of the repetition movement—the God-man relationship.

Kierkegaard’s conception of the relationship between God and man during his 1843 authorship was heavily influenced by two distinct philosophical conceptions—that of Aristotle and Leibniz. As stated throughout this dissertation, Kierkegaard’s philosophy of repetition is heavily indebted to both Aristotle’s ethics and physics—Kierkegaard conceiving ethics as a movement from human potency to actuality through and in virtue. But Kierkegaard was also very much influenced by Aristotle’s metaphysics, and in particular the Aristotelian conception of God as unmoved mover as argued for in the *Metaphysics*.

The relationship of the divine to the human, in the way all philosophy is in a position to conceive it, has already been splendidly expressed by Aristotle when he says that God moves all things, himself axivetos ... It is really the abstract concept of unchangingness, and his influence is therefore a magnetic charm, just like the sirens’ song (JN, 178).

In the above 1843 journal entry, Kierkegaard describes humanity’s relationship to the Divine, as well as his general conception of God, through reference to Aristotle’s conception of God in Book 12, chapter 7 of his *Metaphysics*. Aristotle’s version of the cosmological argument posits the existence of a necessary being that is itself the source of all movement, yet itself unmovable: “a mover which moves without being moved, being eternal substance, and actuality” (Aristotle 1071a 25-26). Aristotle’s unmoved mover is the source of all movement in the heavens, which are brought to movement through the sheer beauty of God’s perfection: “Thus it produces motion by being loved,

and it moves the other moving things” (Aristotle, 1072b 3-4). The primary impetus for movement in Aristotle’s metaphysics is a love for the beauty of God’s perfection, and Kierkegaard seems to transpose this movement of the cosmos to the human soul, arguing that through God’s perfection we will be moved to love not just ourselves, but others (EUD, 97).

In addition to Aristotle’s conception of God as unmoved mover whose “perfect repetition” serves as the motivation for repetition movements in humans, Kierkegaard’s ideas on God and freedom also show heavy influence from Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716). Leibniz is of no minor importance to Kierkegaard’s philosophy of repetition—the only modern philosopher other than Hegel to be mentioned in *Repetition*. In the first paragraph of *Repetition*, Kierkegaard remarks that Leibniz is the only philosopher to truly understand that “all life is repetition” (R, 130). In addition, we know from his journal entries that Kierkegaard read closely Leibniz’s *Theodicy* during the 1842-1843 years,¹¹⁷ and that he was particularly influenced by Leibniz’s *doctrine of harmonia praestabilita* (*doctrine of the pre-established harmony of the world*). Leibniz’s doctrine of pre-established harmony argues for a theological determinism where the “entire course of the world is instilled into each monad prior to his existence” (Eriksen, 119). The monad (the individual), which has been pre-determined by God, is the ultimate metaphysical substance in Leibniz’s metaphysics. Similarly, Kierkegaard also posits a type of theological determinism, arguing that the world is created and willed through God:

¹¹⁷ See JN 5580, 2339, 3073.

If God himself had not willed repetition, the world would never have come into existence. He would either have followed the light plans of hope, or he would have recalled it all and conserved it in recollection. This he did not do, therefore the world endures, and it endures for the fact that it is a repetition (R, 131).

For Kierkegaard, without God's willing of repetition the world "would have never come into existence" and it is only because of God's willing of repetition through time that anything is capable of persisting through time. In addition, the only way that the individual can simultaneously gain and possess himself is if there is a possessor independent of the subject: "Consequently, there must ... be a possessor" (EUD, 166). For Kierkegaard, this possessor can "be none other than ... God himself" (EUD, 166), whose eternal being is capable of holding together the disparate parts of self that are lost and gained in the repetition movement. Where the individual subject is bifurcated into both the mortal and immortal, the finite and the infinite, God is purely eternal and is therefore capable of maintaining the contradiction that is human existence.

However, despite the fact that the monad is completely determined through God's repetition, the subject for Kierkegaard (and Leibniz) is ontologically free. While a supreme possessor is required so that self can persist through the qualitative changes of soul that one undergoes in the repetition movement, "[t]his possessor must possess his soul as legitimate property but nevertheless must not possess it in such a way that the person himself cannot gain it as his legitimate possession" (EUD, 166), God must possess the self in order for the self to exist, yet God's possession cannot interfere with the person's possession of himself as a legitimate possession. In other words, although God is the condition for the individual's possession of himself, this possession is altogether separate from the individual's gaining of soul or ability to "choose," "gain" or "receive"

oneself. Consequently, although the individual's life is in a sense pre-determined by God, the individual is still free—an idea that Kierkegaard borrows from Leibniz.

Every moment of the individual life is thus pre-determined by God in such a way that this determination does not violate the self-expression of the individual. Rather the moment in which the individual actualizes a possibility in his life, is a moment in which the self-expression of the individual coincides with God's determination for that moment. The divine activity is thus repeated in the activity of the Monad (Eriksen, 119).

Even though each moment of an individual's life is pre-determined by God, it does not interfere with the subject's own will or individual "self-expression." The subject's will mirrors the divine plan of the creator, a repetition of God's will, yet remains independent of God's will. God's will repeated in the individual soul is the ultimate repetition for Kierkegaard, and it is because of this repetition that the eternal exists in man and that the individual is capable of the repetition movement (WOL, 261).

Kierkegaard accounts for the paradox of self posed at the beginning of this section through the God-Man relationship.

His soul is a self-contradiction between the external and the internal, the temporal and the eternal. It is a self-contradiction, because wanting to express the contradiction within itself is precisely what makes it what it is. If it were not in contradiction, it would be lost in the life of the world; if it were not self-contradiction, movement would be impossible. It is to be possessed and gained at the same time; it belongs to the world as its illegitimate possession; it belongs to God as his legitimate possession; it belongs to the person himself as his possession, that is, as a possession that is to be gained. Consequently, he gains—if he actually does gain—his soul from God, away from the world through himself! (EUD, 166-167)

The only reason the individual can gain himself, i.e., is capable of undergoing qualitative movements of soul, is because he exists in paradox that is the human condition. Were it

not for the individual's bifurcated nature, there would be no movement, no repetition, only stagnation. However, such a movement requires that one must be "possessed and gained" at the same time, which can only occur because God first possesses the individual as a legitimate possession. In this sense, God's love is the love that "sustains all existence"— "When we speak this way, we are speaking of the love that sustains all existence, of God's love ... If for one moment, one single moment, it were to be absent, everything would be confused" (WOL, 301). The full repetition movement then arises in this way: I gain myself from God, and then, in making that inward turn away from the world, I gain myself through the bifurcated self, which is contained in the process.

3.8 Is Kierkegaard a Religious Thinker?

The reader of this dissertation will no doubt see a contradiction between the opening arguments in the first chapter—which seek to locate a Kierkegaardian ethic separate from his religiosity—and this final chapter, where it is revealed that true ethical repetition is dependent upon a relationship with God. Yet, a few major points need to be made here for clarification. First, it should be clear at this point that Kierkegaard's ethics of repetition is unquestionably independent of his religiosity. Belief in God, yet alone reciprocated love on behalf of the individual, is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for existential fulfillment in Kierkegaard's ethics of repetition, for God's love is completely unconditional. God loves us whether we are grateful or ungrateful, whether we believe or not believe, and for Kierkegaard this is the ultimate gift of existence. Within the context of Kierkegaard's Lutheranism, "God's love for us is an absolute gift; it is not conditional on any response from us; it is given with no claim of a reward" (Ferreira, 8). From this perspective, God's love, though essential to the repetition

movement, has no bearing on the individual's own ethical flourishing, for, regardless of what one does, God's love is invariable.

For Kierkegaard we are born indebted to God insofar as God is the ultimate substratum upon which all subjective becoming arises, but our awareness of this love, yet alone our gratitude for it, has nothing to do with our own individual existential progression. In short, much like Aristotle's conception of God as "thought thinking itself," God's love for Kierkegaard is indifferent to the individual's subjective development. Furthermore, in regard to the individual's relationship with God, "we are, strictly speaking, capable of nothing" (Ferreira, 9). In the same way that God has no bearing on an individual's action, the individual has absolutely no effect on God's existence. For Kierkegaard, this inherent fissure that is the basis of the God-Man relationship—namely the idea that God's love is more of an indifferent placeholder for the self in the process of becoming—is an idea "so abstract that it is at bottom a skeptical thought" (JN, 162). Consequently, it should be clear at this point that the individual need not be a Christian, or even a believer in God, to receive existential fulfillment in his ethics of repetition. In addition, there is no synthesis or unification in this complicated relationship between God and the individual, who, though dependent upon God, is ultimately powerless in the relationship. However, it is precisely this chasm between the individual on the one hand, and God on the other, that makes possible the existential growth and flourishing at the center of Kierkegaard's ethical theory.

But, in response to these facts, one could nonetheless argue that, however much we want to read Kierkegaard as a philosopher examining the human person with regard to ethical possibilities, Kierkegaard's teleology seems clearly skewed towards one particular

possibility—namely towards God and his unique conception of the religious, and many commentators interpret Kierkegaard’s repetition as a religious category.¹¹⁸ Although I have argued that the religious existence sphere in Kierkegaard’s philosophy is merely a deeper understanding and manifestation of the ethical that is indicative of a higher concern for self through deeper relationships, if the highest repetitions depend upon a self-knowledge centered in a proper understanding of God, might we question Kierkegaard’s authority as a philosophical ethical theorist? Adding to the complexity of this problem is one singular statement Kierkegaard makes towards the end of his authorship that would forever obfuscate our understanding of him as philosopher—namely his claim that his sole purpose as an author was concern with one singular problem, “the problem of the whole authorship: how to become a Christian” (POV, 20). Although Heidegger glibly (and contradictorily¹¹⁹) dismisses Kierkegaard on these grounds alone, reconciling Kierkegaard’s Christian faith with his philosophical methodology remains a problem for all interpreters. If Kierkegaard is, from beginning to end, a thinker who never once views existence from outside the Christian framework, to what degree can we place him in the category of thinkers we call philosophers who possess an earnest devotion to the quest for truth?

Answering this question is perhaps the greatest problem for all commentators of Kierkegaard’s philosophy, and this dissertation makes no claims to answer it—*at least from the perspective of his entire authorship*. Kierkegaard was unquestionably a Christian, and more specifically a Christian of the Lutheran tradition, but it is obvious

¹¹⁸ See Carlisle (2005), Dooley (2001), Eriksen (2000), Burgess (1993), and Caputo (1987).

¹¹⁹ Heidegger dismisses Kierkegaard on the basis of his religiosity, though it is difficult to think of one singular thinker who influenced Heidegger’s philosophical ideas more.

that we cannot classify him as a Christian in any traditional sense, especially given the fact that he not only rejected communion on his deathbed, but also forthrightly denied adherence to the Christian doctrine in one of his final works.¹²⁰ What I want to suggest is that, regardless of how we interpret Kierkegaard's claim that we read him exclusively as a Christian apologist, no philosopher can overlook the multiplicity of philosophically dense areas throughout his authorship possessing substantial value independent of any religious framework. The majority of these areas are found in his pseudonymous early period, and I argue that *Repetition*, as a whole, provides the best example of one of these more philosophical works—*largely a result of the fact that he had no religious motive in this work*. At the time of its genesis, Kierkegaard was amidst severe existential turmoil, lacking any one stable truth to cling to. Having broken with his one true love, his father, and his faith, a newly degreed Kierkegaard stared out into boundless sea of human possibility, treading out on 70,000 fathoms of water in a state of terrifying, yet invigorating, uncertainty (SLW, 476-477). It is from these uncertain though philosophically fertile soils that Kierkegaard's philosophy of repetition blooms—from the perspective of an individual whose purpose and place in the world was hopelessly uncertain, *yet infinitely possible*. Consequently, it is essential that we view repetition from the perspective of pure possibility, and, more specifically, from the perspective of an individual who can gain (and of course lose) himself in any one of the multiplicity of actualized human potentialities.

My point here is that, contrary to commentators who interpret Kierkegaard's repetition as a religious category, a particular religious existence for Kierkegaard

¹²⁰ See in particular *The Moment and Late Writings* (Hong, 1998), pages 342-343: "I do not call myself a Christian, do not say of myself that I am a Christian... It is altogether true: I am not a Christian" (M, 340).

represents merely one mode of existence within the boundless inwardness of human striving. We cannot rank modes of existence in relation to one another as higher and lower forms of existence without imposing a hierarchy that Kierkegaard's philosophy rejects. As stated, we can only look at repetition as an inward movement that turns towards the infinite and away from any objective categorization. When the individual is thrown upon himself, he, too, is thrown out into the 70,000 fathoms of water and left to tread in the boundless waters of human possibility in the perpetual transition of the self that is the basis of his existential dialectic. Consequently, Kierkegaard's philosophy of repetition does not offer us one particular way of approaching existence, but instead is foundation from which *all* existential possibilities emerge.

3.9 Kierkegaard vs. Nietzsche

To better understand Kierkegaard's notion of human possibility apart from Kierkegaard's religious project, I think it is helpful to examine briefly his understanding of repetition in comparison to what many argue is its antithesis, namely Nietzsche's eternal return. Many commentators have addressed the relationship between these two ideas¹²¹ and there is good reason for doing so, for both philosophers converge in their shared interest for the philosophical idea of *repetition*. The similarity of both models is uncanny,¹²² especially given the fact that neither philosopher had read one another's

¹²¹ See Carlisle (2005) pgs. 137-148; Ericksen (2000) pgs. 136-164; Caputo (1987) pg. 11; Deleuze (1968) pgs. 5-11.

¹²² While many commentators have examined the close relationship between these two ideas, to be addressed shortly, I find the most peculiar similarity is each philosopher's personal account of coming to discover repetition's "truth." Both philosophers express their discoveries through images of pregnancy and rebirth (see Kierkegaard, JN 170; and Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, pg. 69). Kierkegaard not only compares the creation of *Repetition* to pregnancy, but he later defines authentic repetition as "pregnant repetition." In *Ecce Homo* (1888), Nietzsche discusses in the *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* section how he came to the idea of eternal return in August 1881, while walking through woods near the lake of Sivaplana, "6,000 feet beyond man and time" (*Ecce Homo*, pg. 69). Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche describes this moment, "partly as giving birth, partly as a being reborn" (Ibid.).

work.¹²³ Like most philosophical ideas, there are multiple ways of interpreting Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return—and perhaps with Nietzsche even more so¹²⁴—some more reputable than others.¹²⁵ The most widely accepted interpretation consistent with both Nietzsche's published and unpublished writings suggest we approach eternal recurrence as a sort of existential litmus test. In the section entitled “The Greatest Weight” from his *Gay Science* (1887), Nietzsche prompts the reader to reflect on a situation where a demon, who “stealing after us in our loneliest of lonely,” informs us that we are fated to live our lives over and over again, but in a way where everything is experienced exactly as it had been in the previous life.

This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust! (Sec. 341)

¹²³ Kierkegaard died when Nietzsche was 10. Although we know through written correspondence that Kierkegaard's writings were recommended to Nietzsche by Georg Brandes—to which Nietzsche responded that he would (*Nietzsche Chronicle*, 1888)—he never did. Recent research suggests that Nietzsche may have gained familiarity with Kierkegaard's ideas through two works that Nietzsche not only owned but read—namely Hans Lassen Martensen's *Christliche Ethik* (1873), which provided a rather thorough account of Kierkegaard's ethical and religious conceptions of the individual, and Harold Hoffding's *Psychologies in Umrissen auf Grundlage der Erfahrung* (1887), which provided an exposition and interpretation of Kierkegaard's psychology (see the Brobjer's Nietzsche's “Knowledge of Kierkegaard” from *The Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Volume 41, Number 1, April 2003.) Despite these recent revelations, it is nonetheless unlikely that Nietzsche was exposed to Kierkegaard's philosophy of repetition, which to that point was still relatively unknown.

¹²⁴ For Nietzsche, “there are no facts, only interpretations,” and his philosophy encourages the individual to approach the world from the perspective of multiple interpretations (see *Notebooks*, Summer 1886-Fall 1887 from Kauffman's “Portable Nietzsche” 1954, pg. 458).

¹²⁵ The cosmological/scientific interpretation of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence as a doctrine suggesting that the universe must necessarily repeat itself given the finite (a) the finite configurations of inter-stellar objects and (b) the infinitude of time, supported by Arthur C. Danto in “Nietzsche as Philosopher” (1965, pgs. 203-209), has been largely dismissed. See Kaufman, *Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (1974, p. 327).

Presenting what is the most widely accepted account of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, Alexander Nehamas, in his much acclaimed *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (1985), suggests that "the eternal recurrence is not a theory of the world, but a view of the self" (Nehamas, 150). Rejecting cosmological interpretations of Nietzsche's doctrine that depict eternal recurrence as a theory about the world, Nehamas instead interprets it as a theory of self and, more importantly, a theory as to how the self is constituted. For Nehamas' interpretation, the self for Nietzsche is best understood from the perspective of a literary figure, and more specifically, as a character in a larger narrative. Within the framework of a literary work, the reader does not distinguish its characters apart from the larger narrative framework, which collapses any distinction between the accidental/necessary and the free. Because a literary character's actions (and the personality that emerges through these actions) are inseparable from the story he lives through, altering even the most insignificant of a character's actions within the framework of the larger narrative, would, "change the entire story" (Nehamas, 150). Carrying the analogue of the literary figure over to the living human person, Nehamas argues that those falling into the category of people who lament the demon's revelation would, likewise, desire their life to be otherwise and, in doing so, reject or deny the present life. For Kierkegaard, such a denial is indicative of an individual who is not truly living but dying, and it is this sort of person who Nietzsche holds responsible for the crisis of nihilism.

While I agree with Nehamas and those who propose similar interpretations,¹²⁶ such a reading requires further qualification given Nietzsche's pre-occupation with moral philosophy.¹²⁷ For philosophers like Nietzsche (and Kierkegaard), the ethical is the ontological basis of existence.¹²⁸ Consequently, Nehamas' reading requires that we interpret eternal recurrence not merely as an existential vision, but an existential vision centered on the cultivation of one's ethical character. Re-cast in this light, the eternal return is asking us to reevaluate ourselves from the perspective of ethical value. When we ask ourselves if we would want to live this life again, Nietzsche asks us to reflect on the idea of living our life according to the exact same values. From this reading, Nietzsche's eternal return is to be understood as an ethical litmus test—one that forces us to ponder and perhaps reassess our deepest beliefs and values in light of our own personal conceptions of happiness and self-fulfillment.

Reading Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal return as an ethical litmus test, one can easily see the comparisons to Kierkegaard's philosophy of repetition, and many commentators have examined this relationship.¹²⁹ Of these commentators, Deleuze, in his monumental work *Difference and Repetition* (1968), provides what is perhaps the most comprehensive, yet succinct, analysis of the relationship between these two ideas.¹³⁰ For Deleuze, Nietzsche's eternal recurrence and Kierkegaard's repetition are both

¹²⁶ Like Nehamas, Walter Kaufmann disregards any cosmic reading of Nietzsche's eternal return, interpreting it primarily as an "existential vision," remarking the eternal return "was to Nietzsche less an idea than an experience" (Kaufman, 323)

¹²⁷ The majority of Nietzsche's works address morality and ethical value (see in particular *Genealogy of Morality*, *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *Ecce Homo*), with most commentators reading him primarily as an ethical polemicist concerned with one question, namely moral nihilism.

¹²⁸ For Kierkegaard the individual has existence only insofar as he has a proper understanding of the ethical. Nietzsche also views the individual as a being inseparable from his ethical project, which, like for Kierkegaard, is centered on the cultivation of the individual character.

¹²⁹ See note 119.

¹³⁰ See in particular pgs. 5-11.

philosophies of the future, i.e., philosophies that will carry philosophy forward: “There is a force common to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche ... Each, in his own way, makes repetition the fundamental category of a philosophy of the future” (Deleuze, 5). In the same way that Kierkegaard, through Constantin, describes repetition as a philosophy of hope¹³¹ (and perhaps philosophy’s only hope¹³²) Nietzsche also viewed eternal return as a framework from which philosophy must be rebuilt. Both philosophers suggest that philosophy, in its present nihilism, is unpromising, and any hope for a philosophy of the future will require a more robust conception of truth that can account for the complexities of the dynamic between the individual and world. In addition to Deleuze’s remarks on this convergence point—i.e., the promise of a new truth that will save philosophy from the trappings of nihilism—it is also important to note the forward-looking quality of both theories, for both thinkers approach truth as something to be revealed in the future. Contra classical conceptions of truth as a pre-existing knowledge to be recollected, truth for both Kierkegaard—and at least the later Nietzsche¹³³—can only be conceived as something that is revealed in time, and therefore as something that has yet to be revealed. Consequently, truth for both philosophy requires a forward (and not backward looking) philosophical worldview.

Deleuze uses the shared “futural” component of these two philosophies of repetition as a departure point for further analysis. For Deleuze, both Nietzsche and

¹³¹ Though overly simplistic, Perkins goes so far as to suggest that Kierkegaard’s repetition is about one singular idea, one “four-letter word: hope” (Perkins, 196).

¹³² Constantin not only tells us that “[r]epetition is a new category that must be discovered,” but that repetition will be to the philosophers of the future what recollection and mediation were to the Greeks and Moderns respectively (R, 18: Piety). In addition, Constantin promises that repetition will be “the indispensable condition” for the solution to all future “ethical contemplation” (R, 19: Piety).

¹³³ Where Nietzsche’s earlier writings seek a return to some more primordial and authentic state of existence (see in particular *Birth of Tragedy*, 1872), Nietzsche’s later writings dismiss the possibility of the return to a more basic stage of being (see *The Gay Science*, 1882).

Kierkegaard depict repetition as a liberating movement that opposes “all forms of generality,” and more specifically, as a movement that liberates the individual from “the laws of nature and morality” and the “forces of habit and memory” (Deleuze, 5). Deleuze rightly captures the oppositional and negative quality of repetition’s movement. Consistent with the thesis of this chapter that defines authentic repetitions as a break or liberation from the world of objectivity, Deleuze likewise suggests that authentic subjective states can emerge only through a rejection or liberation from such “general” accounts of truth, be they the natural laws of science, the generalities of habit (and memory),¹³⁴ or the laws of morality. This liberation for Deleuze can come about only through a “freedom” and “a task of freedom” (Deleuze, 6), and though Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have diverging conceptions of free will in relation to repetition, both associate repetition’s liberating movement with a self-actualizing power based in a type of self-mastery. Finally, Deleuze correctly associates the liberating force of repetition with irony and humor, which, he argues, are the primary forces that an individual can use to “overturn the laws of generality” (Deleuze, 5)—an idea that, though more akin to Kierkegaard’s ethics, can also be found in Nietzsche.¹³⁵ Deleuze rightly depicts Kierkegaard’s self as a being that is defined in the conflict between its difference (and repetition)¹³⁶ with objective conceptions of truth—a self that emerges in its rejection of these frameworks. In addition, Deleuze rightly approaches Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as

¹³⁴ Deleuze discusses the similarities between Freud’s understanding of repetition and that of Nietzsche’s and Kierkegaard’s. Freud’s psychology suggests that the ego is largely defined by the past, and Freudian psychoanalysis forces the patient to return and reflect upon painful or traumatic memories with the aim of liberating him from the debilitating psychological effects of such trauma (Deleuze, 14-19).

¹³⁵ Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche viewed humor and laughter as a destructive force that shatters all objective categories of thought: “Not by wrath does one kill, but by laughter” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part 1, Ch. 7).

¹³⁶ Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (1968) presents a new metaphysics centered on a conception of identity as a relational understanding of truth that proposes a similar relation theory of identity, which he most likely discovered in his examination of *Repetition*’s existential dialectic.

philosophers who throw us into the paradoxical polemic of the modern moral crisis, offering us two distinct approaches to navigating out of the present age's nihilism.

Deleuze argues that "both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche incorporate the movement of repetition into their literary style: they "bring to philosophy a new means of expression," seeking "to put metaphysics into motion, in action" (Deleuze, 8). Yet, with regard to how each philosopher "puts metaphysics into action" these philosophers, according to Deleuze, diverge in their conceptions of repetition.

It then becomes easy to speak of the differences between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Even this question, however, must no longer be posed at the speculative level of the ultimate nature of the God of Abraham or the Dionysus of Zarathustra. It is rather a matter of knowing what it means to "produce movement," to repeat or obtain repetition. Is it a matter of leaping, as Kierkegaard believes? Or is it rather a matter of dancing, as Nietzsche thinks? ... Nietzsche's leading idea is to ground the repetition in eternal return on the death of God and the dissolution of the self. Kierkegaard dreams of an alliance between a God and a self rediscovered. All sorts of differences follow: is the movement in the sphere of the mind, or in the entrails of the earth which knows neither God nor self? Where will it be better protected against generalities, against mediations? (Deleuze, 10-11)

While Deleuze observes the similarities between Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, like many commentators before him, Deleuze erroneously characterizes the philosophies as opposing worldviews. For Deleuze, and other interpreters,¹³⁷ Kierkegaard and Nietzsche represent two distinct and disparate approaches to the modern moral crisis: Where Kierkegaard's repetition offers us salvation from nihilism through a spiritual movement centered in the God-man relationship, Nietzsche's eternal return "melts down the vertical axis of Kierkegaard's spiritual movement" (Carlisle, 138), offering us salvation from morality's crisis in this world, and in particular, within the esthetic. Regarding such

¹³⁷ In addition to Deleuze, see Carlisle (2005) and Eriksen (2000).

interpretations, I want to suggest the following. While both philosophers offer a solution to moral crisis, and Nietzsche's solution is unquestionably centered in the esthetic, we cannot read Kierkegaard as offering the reader any one particular existential embodiment—for his philosophy of repetition is precisely the foundation from which all existential potentialities emerge. Although Deleuze and others rightly view Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as moral polemicists who dance and leap through the existential dialectic in two very unique ways, we cannot interpret Kierkegaard as offering any one particular existential modality, at least in the 1843 authorship. Kierkegaard clearly distinguishes between various types of repetitions (esthetic, ethical, and religious) and he would unquestionably take Nietzsche to task on his claim that one can only find existential fulfillment exclusively in the esthetic.¹³⁸ Although Nietzsche builds his epistemology upon the idea of perspectivism,¹³⁹ Nietzsche ultimately favors one perspective, the esthetic, which seems to delimit our understanding of the human person. Kierkegaard clearly finds more substance in the ethical and the ethical-religious worldviews over the esthetic, yet this preference is only in relation to esthetic frameworks that are altogether devoid of an ethical awareness and sensibility. Kierkegaard in no way rejects the esthetic as a whole, for we know that authentic existence cannot emerge in its absence. Furthermore, the esthetic is by no means lacking in existential value for Kierkegaard. Although it is only in the ethical that the self can be said to truly exist, as argued throughout this dissertation, the esthetic for Kierkegaard is itself pregnant with ethical values, and all the higher functioning esthetes in his work (namely 'A', the Young Man,

¹³⁸ "It is only as an esthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified." *Birth of Tragedy* 5, pg. 52); see also *Birth of Tragedy* 4 "Attempt at a Self Criticism" pg. 22.

¹³⁹ For Nietzsche, there are not truths, only interpretations. Given the fact that there is no "God's-eye" view from which we can view the world and self, Nietzsche argues that we must deny the existence of a "Truth" and instead accept the possibility of many truths.

and Constantin) gain an ethical consciousness that rivals Judge William's, whose own is perhaps lacking in "creativity" and "wit." In short, although Kierkegaard finds fault in many of the esthete's ideas, one cannot separate his understanding of the existential dialectic from the esthetic sphere. Consequently, to read Kierkegaard's philosophy of repetition as a purely religious movement is to misinterpret *Repetition's* primary message, which emphasizes the possibility of change and human potentiality.

Contra Deleuze and others, Kierkegaard's repetition does not promote any specific vision of existence. Instead, it represents the entire spectrum of existential possibilities that confront the individual amidst those self-defining transitory states of subjective becoming. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard declares, through Constantin, that repetition is simultaneously "the interest of metaphysics, as well as the point from which it becomes stranded" (R, 19: Piety), for it is from the perspective of repetition that all other truths have their hold. From this reading, repetition must not be construed as one particular approach to morality's moral crisis, which, most commentators suggest, emerges exclusively through a relationship with God, *but instead as the wellspring from which the project of selfhood must emerge*—namely the framework of human possibility. The support for my claim that repetition has no religious agenda has already been stated—Kierkegaard's own existential uncertainty (and authority) at the time of its genesis was, also, without an agenda. That Kierkegaard had not yet chosen himself through actualizing any particular existential worldview is essential to reading *Repetition*, and although he did eventually choose a worldview consistent with his own unique religiosity, the source of his initial existential crisis was spawned by the very lack of a framework. *Repetition* does not argue that one must choose any one particular

worldview. Instead, its purpose is to reveal to its reader the infinitude of human becoming and human potentiality from which the existential dialectic emerges.

To return to the original problem presented in the introduction of this dissertation, which asked whether or not Kierkegaard's *Repetition* provides us with a viable ethical framework for navigating our way through the modern moral crisis and the present age's nihilism, it can be concluded at this point that Kierkegaard philosophy of repetition does. In comparison to other post-modern frameworks that limit the boundless realm of human striving to one particular existential sphere, Kierkegaard offers us a more robust approach to ethics that does not limit the richness of subjective becoming. To the contrary, Kierkegaard's philosophy of repetition is best understood as an openness to the infinitude of human possibility that is the foundation of the infinite striving of the existential dialectic.

Conclusion

I began this dissertation comparing Kierkegaard's *Repetition* to an ungainly and out of control stagecoach. Kierkegaard was quite fond of using the stagecoach as an analogy for modes of existing, and in the *Postscript* he discusses two very different types of living through two different stagecoach analogies (CUP, 311-312). In one, we are told of a drunken peasant who, nodding off behind the wheel, has let the horses steer his course home as he lies passed out dreaming in the carriage. In the second, we are told of a driver who, though has two mismatched horses, grabs the reigns and works towards steering the horses. Where the drunken, dreaming peasant depicts the esthetic mode of existence, the driver who grabs the reigns depicts someone for whom existence is of tremendous concern, i.e., someone who has entered the ethical or ethico-religious worldview. But how exactly would someone like the drunken peasant make such a qualitative change into the worldview where life is of a concern? This dissertation has concluded that such a change for Kierkegaard arises through the repetition movement, a transition stage whereby the self, through deeper levels of self-awareness in relation to the ideas of freedom, love, and temporality, undergoes qualitative changes of soul through an ongoing process of self renewal.

Generally speaking, Kierkegaard's ethics of repetition argues that one becomes ethical by "choosing to choose" the ethical life, i.e., to view the world beyond the immediacy of the interesting and the boring and instead according to the categories of good and bad. To make this decision marks a radical change in one's worldview, for it is in this choice that the individual comes to view himself as a being with a past and future, i.e., as a being with a historical and temporal continuity. It is in this moment that the

individual first collects himself as a concrete entity under the project of “selfhood” and gains a sense of personhood or self. The esthete has no temporal awareness beyond the immediacy of the moment and consequently lacks the historical continuity that is a condition for having any sense of identity. In addition, because the esthete lacks a concept of self, existence is of no concern for the esthete, which is why it doesn’t matter if ‘A’ chooses to marry or commit suicide. It is only when one has reached what Kierkegaard calls “consciousness raised to second power”—an awareness of self marked by a proper understanding of love, freedom, and temporality—that one can truly exist. As stated, one can reach this level of ethical awareness and inwardness in at least two ways, through despairing over the limitations of the esthetic worldview or through undergoing extreme suffering or adversity. In each of these cases, the individual is thrown into a moment of earnest self-reflection where he is forced to reconsider the value of the esthetic worldview and consider for the first time the merits of the ethical life. Of course, mere awareness of the ethical does not necessitate that the individual will actually “choose to choose” the ethical life. Although it is clear that the Young Man and Constantin (both high functioning esthetes) have reached the heightened awareness that is a necessary condition for transitioning into ethical, neither transcend the esthetic worldview. Because they lack a conception of self to return to, neither Constantin nor the Young Man are capable of returning and repeating in the fullest sense and so they sit stagnant somewhere between the esthetic and the ethical.

What truly separates the individual who chooses to choose the ethical life from the individual who is merely aware of it but doesn’t act upon this knowledge is an acceptance of the paradoxical and often absurd nature of the project of selfhood. Like the

carriage driver who must hold together two mismatched horses, a condition for selfhood requires that the subject keep together the two very disparate and irreconcilable components constituting human existence—necessity and freedom; body and soul; human and divine; mortal and immortal. Consequently, a necessary condition for transitioning into the ethical life is the development of an ironic mood or “formation”—an acceptance of the absurdity of the existence (an “ironic elasticity”) that is necessary for the preservation and enduring of the self through the existential struggle that is subjective becoming. For Kierkegaard such an irony is to be acquired through the negation of the objective world and made manifest in the passion and enthusiasm to continue to press forward in life through one’s trials and tribulations despite the absurdity of the human condition.

However, even when one has acquired the ironic attitude, the decision to choose to choose the ethical life is not a choice that is over and done with once the decision has been made. The original decision to live according to the good and the bad must be returned to and reassessed through particular actions and decisions. If the marriage is to have a stable foundation, the commitment must be renewed frequently through the day-to-day acts of love in the relationship, and each of these particular actions is a revisiting to the original project of selfhood embarked upon in that original choice. In addition, it is in this revisiting where the subject gains the cohesiveness of selfhood, for it is in and through these individual actions that one builds ethical character while simultaneously gaining “existential weight” as a subject—the condition for an authentic return and repetition. Of course, without an earnest persistence in the infinite striving that is the project of subjective becoming, the subject will most likely despair in the process.

Consequently, in addition to acquiring an ironic mood, Kierkegaard also suggests that the project of selfhood that one decides upon in “choosing to choose” requires the acquisition of the virtue of earnestness or “ethical seriousness”—a virtue that indicates a serious commitment to the ongoing dedication to the pursuit of authentic subjectivity.

Kierkegaard describes the repetition movement as a transcendence of self from potentiality to actuality, and as argued throughout the latter part of this dissertation, this transition cannot be brought about merely through one’s own doing, for the repetition movement and the choosing of oneself associated with the transcendence seems as dependent upon *the other* as it is on the subject willing the repetition. For Kierkegaard, the supreme other can only be God, whose eternal being is capable of holding together the disparate parts of self that are lost and gained in the repetition movement. With God’s strength and love the individual can through his own knowledge and inner soul-strength wade into the winds of existence and persist through the storm of subjective becoming as he perpetually gains, loses, and receives himself back through the ongoing transcendence of *repetition’s* existential dialectic.

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